

Actions speak loudly

Leaders may talk about corporate values and goals, but it's often their nonverbal communication—their everyday attitudes, behaviors and decisions—that gets heard

by Thomas J. Lee

Nonverbal communication includes day-to-day choices, habits, hunches, expectations and biases.

From our first days of life, we use nonverbal communication to demand change. We cry. We wail. We flail our arms and legs. Eventually, we get our way. Someone comes along with a fresh diaper.

Dry and comfortable once again, we learn an important lesson long before we ever talk: We can speak just fine without words.

The lesson sticks with us. Through adolescence and into adulthood, we communicate many of our needs and wants nonverbally. From smiling at the cute classmate in algebra to driving a flashy red sports car, we implicitly proclaim our

interests, values and identity.

That's equally true for managers in the workplace. And it is especially true in management cultures that hoard information, or tiptoe around the truth, or rely on euphemisms to blunt accountability, or nurture a culture of extreme deference and politeness. The more employees must read between the lines for real messages and their true intent, the more nonverbal communication will establish or clarify strategic priorities and cultural norms.

But here's the rub: Most people have only a superficial appreciation of nonverbal communication. They typically think of it merely as body lan-

guage, facial expression and vocal intonation. They cite examples such as poor posture, idle fidgeting or shifting eyes. Translated, that is evidence of laziness, anxiety or dishonesty.

"Just look at your president," a European friend remarked to me, an American, in 2007. "The way he walks, with his arms wide at his side. It always looks as if he is spoiling for a fight."

Like beauty, such judgments are in the eye of the beholder. Still, those kinds of clues are the least of nonverbal communication. Body language, facial expression and vocal intonation can send plain messages, true. But they pale in the workplace against larger actions that speak



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Unless you back up your statements with genuine action, don't be surprised if your employees can see through the mask of propriety.

100 decibels louder than any words possibly can.

Over the course of 15 years, my colleagues and I have conducted dozens of focus groups with hundreds of employees, both managerial and non-managerial alike. In all these sessions, participants rarely referred to body language, facial expression or vocal intonation (though we have heard more than a few complaints of temperamental managers and careless workers).

In contrast, many have cited larger attitudes, behaviors and decisions that they interpret as signals of inclusion or exclusion, engagement or disengagement, appreciation or scorn, an open



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mind or a closed mind, strategic or nonstrategic priorities, arrogance or humility, and personal or business focus.

So it's clear that attitudes, behaviors and decisions are powerful communication. On further analysis, it is also clear that they are usually unintended and unmanaged. Neither corporate leaders nor their communication advisers typically plan for nonverbal communication. That's a huge missed opportunity.

What exactly do these attitudes, behaviors and decisions consist of? For better or worse, they are day-to-day choices, habits, hunches, expectations and biases, especially on the part of managers—things like setting a tight new deadline or tougher quality threshold, leaving early after draping a sweater on the chair, neglecting to return a voice mail message, taking a summer intern to lunch, approving a substandard piece of work, flying coach instead of first class, firing a supervisor who is abusive to women—or, all too common, retreating from an important question



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Spoiling for a fight? That's what George W. Bush's stance communicated to one European.

about the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room.

Reinforcing the vision

Implicit, nonverbal communication is especially powerful, and especially unfortunate when it

conflicts with written norms such as a values statement, a production quota or standard, a job description, a corporate vision, or an ethics code. In the face of such conflict, the impact of implicit, nonverbal communication and explicit, verbal communication (that is, the written norm) is never equal. The two are never even close to equal. One of them—the same one—will always trump the other.

The more visible and stark the image, the better the communication. For a conceptual benchmark, imagine a Fortune 500 chief executive choosing to lunch spontaneously in the cafeteria with employees he has never met. In your mind's eye, notice him asking for their perspective on street-level obstacles to strategic execution, and then watch as he begins taking notes on the back of an old envelope. (Of course, the conversation is verbal communication. But it is the nonverbal decision to lunch with ground-level employees that really packs the wallop.) That's powerful stuff, indeed.

Now let's take a look at real-world examples of implicit, nonverbal communication that go way beyond body language, facial expression and vocal intonation.

Leadership behaviors. Several years ago, I accompanied the site leader of a vast jet-fighter manufacturing plant on a tour of the facility in Marietta, Georgia. The newest jet fighters in the Western arsenal, the F/A-22 Raptor, were just rolling off the assembly line. For more than an hour, we drove around the base. Twice we drove onto a tarmac where new Raptors were

Powerful presence: Management by wandering around

In a business world that seems to have an acronym or abbreviation for everything, the initials MBWA—Management by Wandering Around—are familiar shorthand for a manager's physical presence and accessibility, a powerful form of nonverbal communication.

Of course, the conversations that ensue are verbal. But a manager's presence and accessibility alone count a great deal as nonverbal communication.

The point of MBWA is to close the gap between management and employees. Instead of merely claiming to have an open-door policy, managers get out of their offices and into the company's sphere of operations—the factory floor, an accounting office,

a retail store or what have you. There, they hope to see for themselves what's going on.

Most people and even some textbooks err in defining MBWA as Management by *Walking* Around. Actually, the term is Management by *Wandering* Around. The difference is crucial.

Managers who briskly walk through on their way to a meeting—instead of leisurely wandering around—never realize the potential value of MBWA. The idea is to linger in hope of spur-of-the-moment observations and conversations. When managers speed-walk through, they defeat the purpose. Their presence is what counts.

—T.J.L.

parked. Their jet engines are so incredibly powerful, they can suck in small debris from a distance. Because of that, it's important to keep the tarmac push-broom clean. Otherwise, gravel and debris can wreck the engines.

Ever since the Raptors went into production, the company had campaigned hard against debris. As we stopped at the guard post before driving onto the tarmac, the site leader got out of the car, bent down by each wheel, and carefully inspected each tire's tread for gravel and debris. Then he got back behind the wheel, rolled forward 18 inches, got out once more, and did it again.

Keep in mind his alternatives: He could have directed an aide in the backseat to inspect the tires. He could have walked around the car and given only a cursory glance at the tires. He could have neglected to do anything and just sped ahead. Instead, he took time to inspect the tires very thoroughly. That was not by happenstance. He knew that others were watching him, and he knew that this was an opportunity to send a powerful, implicit message reinforcing the verbal norm against debris.

Visibility. A worker in a South Carolina factory told us she didn't even know what the former plant manager looked like. She had never seen him, for he stayed in his office all day. But the new manager was a breath of fresh air, she said. "Last weekend he stopped in with his wife on their way home from dinner. He introduced her to all of us. It was real refreshing."

That requires an outgoing

personality and an affinity for people, of course. Unfortunately, many managers won their last promotion because of technical competencies, not people skills.

Policy decisions. The great economist Milton Friedman famously proclaimed that the only responsibility of business is to maximize its profits. Aaron Feuerstein disagreed. After a 1995 fire destroyed his Massachusetts textile mill, he spent his own money to keep 3,000 workers on the payroll while the factory was rebuilt. The decision cost him US\$25 million but earned him a reputation as a man who truly cared about people.

Many companies proclaim that employees are their greatest asset. In an era of offshoring and downsizing, few believe the spin. Feuerstein stunned everyone by demonstrating that he was serious. He had the courage of his convictions, and it showed.

Personnel choices. Who is hired and who is promoted send unmistakable signals throughout an organization. When a manager with a track record of safety violations or demeaning behavior takes a step up the ladder, everyone else can fairly conclude that safety and diversity are actually not all that important—and that people are not, after all, the company's most important asset.

The venerable Jack Welch used to draw a two-by-two matrix to identify managers whose business results were or weren't satisfactory and whose behavior was or wasn't congruent with General Electric's val-



RICK FRIEDMAN

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ues. The winners who excelled at both were in line for promotion. The losers who failed at both were out the door. The real test for GE, Welch declared, lay in how it treated the other two categories. In the end, if values matter, he said managers must behave congruently, regardless of their business results.

Use of time. On my first visit to the headquarters of Chick-fil-A, a privately held and unabashedly Christian company, a well-dressed gentleman approached me in the lobby. "Who do we have here?" he asked cheerily, and then he introduced himself as Dan Cathy, the company's president and chief operating officer. After it became clear I was 40 minutes early for a 9 a.m. appointment, he invited me to the company's morning devotional down the hall. While some may quarrel

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with mixing business and religion, Cathy viewed his role as deliberately spending time—his scarcest resource—to reinforce the company's values.

Presence and accessibility.

You can think of presence and accessibility in four ways: physical, social, intellectual and emotional. Each has its difficulties. We're all familiar with managers who pride themselves on having an open door. But how many announce their availability for impromptu collaboration with hourly employees? More important, how many pride themselves on keeping an open mind when an employee offers a process-improvement suggestion?

More common, I fear, are managers like those I met at a factory in Tennessee, who made clear they resented the interruption and viewed employee suggestions as meddling. Far from implementing any process improvements suggested by hourly workers, these managers ignored them all. Something tells me they're still wondering why employees are so cynical.

None of this is to say that words do not matter. Far from it. Words matter greatly. Indeed, many of these attitudes, behaviors and decisions reveal themselves in the presence of words. But the words count only to the extent that people regard them as true and real. For that, they look around them, and they take notice.

At day's end, people may or may not hear what you say. But they will always see what you do, and seeing is believing. •



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