

Pay attention to the non-verbal signals

In human interaction we tend to focus too much on words and culturally-learned signals and too little on human and personal signals, says Henrik Wenøe, Owner and Founder of Acuity World.



For many of us communication is about saying the right things in the right way; but words are only a small part of the communication. “The body moves before the mouth, and in order to become more effective in interacting with others, we need to better understand the non-verbals”, says Henrik Wenøe.

Better understanding of non-verbals saves energy

“Most people are polite – in some cultures much more than in others. We often do not get the correct but rather the politically correct version of the truth”, says Henrik Wenøe. Thus, in order to lift our interaction and understanding to a higher level, it is important to read and understand a broader range of signals, which can save us time, money, and energy.

Three types of non-verbal signals

Many non-verbal signals are learned, they are culturally bound, and we are typically aware of them, e.g. shaking hands. Other signals are we less aware of, for instance human signals and personal signals. All in all there are three important types of non-verbal signals; some easier to read than others:

1. Cultural signals: Learned signals, e.g. shaking hands in Germany, nodding in China, or bowing in Japan.
2. Human signals: Universal to all humans, e.g. smiling, displaying surprise, anger, disgust, fear, etc.
3. Personal signals: Unique signals and individual to each person, e.g. idiosyncratic hand-movements.

Cultural signals are only a small part of communication

“Cross-cultural training focuses typically on the cultural signals, but they are only a very small part of the total communication equation”, warns Henrik Wenøe. By also learning to notice the human and personal signals, for instance a fake smile, you will get a richer picture of a person’s state of mind.

“An over-emphasis on cultural signals results in people not actually interacting with each other, but instead with the image they have in their mind of how this person is”, says Henrik Wenøe. Consequently, we are not really engaging with the person but their cultural stereotype.” I don’t claim that cross-cultural training isn’t important to avoid the worst kinds of mistakes; but cross-cultural training alone is not enough”, explains Henrik Wenøe. “In order to truly connect with and understand the other person, you need to take it a step further – you need to show genuine interest.”

“To give an example from my own experience: In my previous job I attended a 1-day internal company seminar in Stockholm. The purpose of the meeting was to get to know each other better in order to improve cross-national collaboration. The meeting started with an externally facilitated cross-cultural training session, which ended up being quite unproductive to



Henrik Wenøe is Founder and Owner of Acuity World, a Danish-based Consultancy which focuses on leadership and sales development training and coaching. Henrik is certified NLP™ trainer (The Society of NLP) with clients spread across Europe. His core competence is on tailoring training programs targeting managers and professional sales & marketing people. Henrik’s primary focus lies in working with both individuals and organizations to improve their management and communication performance both personally and professionally.

[More about Henrik \(in Danish\)](#) →

Got questions?



Andrea Straub-Bauer

Konsulent
Tlf: +45 3377 3633
Mobil: +45 2128 8898
E-mail: ansb@di.dk

cross-cultural training session, which ended up being counterproductive to the overall purpose of the meeting. Instead of getting to know my colleagues Marianne and Hanne, who were from Sweden and Norway respectively, I ended up meeting a Swede and a Norwegian.

Human signals are pre-culture

“Human signals are universal. All humans send them regardless of their cultural heritage; no matter if they are from India, Italy, Denmark, or China”, says Henrik Wenøe. American-based researcher and Professor of Psychology Paul Ekman has extensively studied facial expressions. He found for instance that humans flex two muscle groups when they smile; i.e. the muscles around the mouth (muscle group nr. 12) and the muscles around the eyes (muscle group nr. 6). The muscles around the mouth can be moved by will, while muscles around the eyes are activated by a region in the brain that cannot be controlled by will. Thus, by reading the face we can get information if a person is truly happy or just putting up a smile. Along these lines Paul Ekman has mapped a broad range of emotional states and the associated muscles groups, including e.g. anger, contempt, disgust, etc.

“So, by noticing signals beyond the cultural ones, you will get a much more detailed picture of how people feel and what state they are in”, says Henrik Wenøe, but you have to be quick, as these signals only last a split second.

Personal signals are highly individual

“Personal signals on the other hand are unique for each and every individual and this is usually where I focus my attention”, says Henrik Wenøe. Humans process questions first with their body and only second with their mind, which means that when I ask a question the body will answer first and the mouth second. The difficult thing about personal signals is that I don't know what they mean if I only see them once. That's why I often at the beginning of a meeting ask a lot of questions where a person has no reason for lying.

These are questions where a person will typically say yes, e.g. “I understand that you have your degree from the University of Beijing”. Consequently, I will get the verbal and non-verbal signals to this question at the same time, which helps me figure out a pattern. Once I have deciphered the personal signals, I am more likely to know if we are in agreement or not.” My advice is therefore to check if there is a match between the verbal and non-verbal clues”. This will provide a more confident assessment of the meeting and its outcome.

Picking up on personal signals across a distance

Picking up on personal signals during a video conference is no longer a problem given today's technological advancements. But when visuals are not available, e.g. during a teleconference, we need to rely on other signals such as the tone of voice. Even without knowing the person, the tone of voice is a good reflection of a person's state of mind. By listening carefully to e.g. the speed of speech, or if a person is quiet or active during the conversation, you can pick up a lot of information. “It's about listening to how people are saying what they are saying”, explains Henrik Wenøe.

Henrik's advice for successful interaction

“Leaving own preconceptions at home, opening up and truly noticing the other person is my recipe for engaging more profoundly with others”, explains Henrik Wenøe. Try to get in tune with the human signals, e.g. people leaning forward when they like something and leaning backwards when they don't; are they happy or are they not happy; are they present or are they not present; is there a connection between us or is there not? And finally, pay attention to contradictory signals such as saying one thing and doing something else.

By training yourself to pay more attention to the broad range of bodily signals – i.e. the cultural, human, and personal – you will be able to entice more quality information and hence engage more successfully with other people even across a distance.



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