



NONVERBAL MESSAGES IN MEETINGS



You might
want to
know

3M Meeting Network

Have you ever been to a meeting where, even though the leader said she wanted high participation, she stood at the end of the table and “talked at” the participants seated silently down both sides? Chances are you have. It’s unfortunate, but true: Leaders who don’t plan for real participation won’t get it, no matter what they say they want. Standing at the end of a long table sends a strong nonverbal message: DON’T TALK, LISTEN. It’s a good setup — if you want to discourage participation.

Actions *do* speak louder than words. Applying this maxim to meeting management requires that you take careful stock of your meeting room and where people will sit. How much does it matter? One study reports the percentage of a message communicated through our different communication channels in this way:

- Words we say: 7%
- Tone of voice: 38%
- Body language: 55%

Need proof? Think of the last time you were with someone who stood with his arms crossed, tapping his foot and looking annoyed, who then huffed, “I’m *fine*.” Which clues did you believe — the words or the body language and tone of voice? Physical, nonverbal messages often send a much louder message than spoken words.

Control or collaboration?

There are ways to deliberately convey nonverbal messages. When you’re the leader and you need to maintain control of a meeting:

1. Run the meeting yourself to signal “I’m in charge.”
2. Stand while others are sitting to signal “I have the floor.”
3. Sit at the head of the table to signal “I’m in charge.”

If you want a highly participative, collaborative meeting:

1. Ask a team member or facilitator to run the meeting to signal "Let's share leadership."
2. Sit while others are sitting to signal "I'm with you."
3. Sit on one side of the table instead of at the head, to signal "I'm with you."

What if you expect confrontation?

The most confrontational position you can assume is to stand or sit directly across from another. You can increase or decrease feelings of confrontation by purposely choosing where to sit in relation to the confronter. If you seek to resolve your differences, try to sit as close as you can to the person. This sends the signal that you want to resolve the conflict.

Designing the room

To minimize participation and interruptions:

- Set up a long, narrow table for a smaller meeting, placing the leader at the end.
- Choose a seating arrangement that minimizes eye contact between participants (classroom-style seating), where one presenter faces the audience.

- Create an expectation that speech comes only from the front of the room.

To maximize participation and collaboration:

- Choose a round or square table, with the leader seated as a member of the group.
- For longer meetings, set up chairs in a U-shape, instead of using classroom-style row seating, so that the participants face each other.
- For large groups, arrange banquet-style seating to accommodate five to eight, using as many round tables as necessary.

You can create high levels of participation even at large meetings by combining banquet seating and meeting procedures that encourage collaboration:

- Direct participants to introduce themselves to each other.
- Ask groups to generate ideas around their tables; then ask tables to report to the entire group.
- Make it easy for the presenter or leader to move among the tables to create a sense of inclusion.

When you are the leader, using these tips can help ensure that you get the level of participation you seek.

Make the meeting.

Related Reading

Body Language in the Workplace; Julius Fast; Viking Pen; 1994.

Practical NLP for Managers; Ian McDermott and Joseph O'Connor; Ashgate Publishing Co.; 1996.

Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles & Applications; Dale G. Leathers; Allyn & Bacon; 1996.

Helpful Hints

Room brightness affects participation. For more interactive presentations use a bright multi-media projector or a high-end overhead projector so you can leave the room's lights on.

Sometimes it's the small things that make a big difference. Having snacks and drinks available for meeting participants makes them feel welcomed and cared for.

1-800-952-4059

www.3M.com/meetings



3M Visual Systems Division

Building A145-5N-01
6801 River Place Blvd.
Austin, TX 78726-9000



*Recycled paper,
40% pre-consumer,
10% post-consumer*

Litho in U.S.A. © 3M 1998
78-6970-7812-5 (06850.0)CSI

All rights reserved. 3M and the 3M logo are trademarks of 3M. All other product names mentioned herein are the trademarks of their respective owners.