

The 5 Keys to Mastering Body Language

Can you become more fluent in nonverbal communication?

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There is solid research evidence that people can become more skilled at communicating nonverbally – sending messages and emotions successfully through facial expressions and [body language](#), and being able to read others’ emotions, feelings, and thoughts. However, nonverbal communication is not a “language” in the traditional sense. It is complex, abstract, and often confusing. However, it can be mastered. Here are the keys to developing nonverbal communication skill.

1. [Motivation](#) to Develop. <http://twitter.com/#!/ronriggio> First and foremost, you need to be motivated and really WANT to develop your ability to communicate nonverbally. It’s not easy, and takes a lot of time and dedication. You need to set goals, get feedback about your successes and failures, and practice, practice, practice.

2. Develop Decoding Skills. The ability to “read” others’ nonverbal cues is considered to be the most important component of mastering body language. You must be attentive and observant and focused on getting feedback about accuracy (you can’t improve if you don’t get feedback about whether your interpretation is correct). It is a good idea, therefore, to have a learning partner to help in development.

Although there are universal expressions of emotions (i.e., smiling to indicate [happiness](#); frowning = sadness), emotions can be faked. It also helps to study specific individuals and to learn their expressive patterns.

3. Encoding Skills. Encoding is your ability to convey nonverbal messages to others through your facial expressions, posture, gestures, and tone of voice. There is some research evidence that nonverbal decoding and encoding skills are positively correlated (i.e., “it takes one to know one”), so [understanding](#) how to effectively convey messages nonverbally may also help develop your ability to read others’ expressions.

Becoming a good nonverbal encoder/sender really has two parts to it: developing your ability to express feelings authentically, what is often referred to as emotional expressiveness, but also being a good emotional actor.

Again, it takes quite a bit of work to become a good enactor of nonverbal cues. One of my colleagues, who is a terrific public speaker, says that he spent over a year just working on his gesturing while speaking – to make his gestures enhance his verbal presentation, but also to make the gesturing appear natural.

4. Knowledge of Social Norms and Scripts. It is not enough to just focus on reading others’ body language and being able to send your own accurate nonverbal messages. To be a true master of nonverbal communication you need to understand the communication context. What this means is being able to use your knowledge of social rules, or norms, and understanding patterns of social behavior (called “scripts”) in order to more accurately decode and encode nonverbal behaviors. Think of it this way: communicating nonverbally is a big part of [Emotional Intelligence](#), but without truly understanding social situations (Social [Intelligence](#)), you can’t master body language.

5. Nonverbal Regulatory Skills. While being expressive and a good emotional actor is important, it is also critical that you be able to regulate your nonverbal behavior to be socially effective. This means that you may have to mask felt emotions with a different emotion (i.e., “put on a happy face” even when you are experiencing negative emotions). Also, if your own emotional experiences are

intense, you will not be poised enough to pay full attention to others' nonverbal behaviors.

Becoming a master of body language is not easy, and takes a great deal of work, but in our experience in programs designed to improve nonverbal communication we have often found that trainees experience immediate rewards. As one participant in a training program told us, "right away, my girlfriend noticed that I was getting better at expressing my feelings, and with understanding her moods, and it's really helped our relationship." Many of us spend time improving our writing or speaking skills. It is just as important to pay attention to developing our abilities to communicate nonverbally.

References

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