

7 Nonverbal communication and listening

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7.1 Introduction

By now you'll be aware that communication consists of more than just verbal messages. You'll remember from Chapter 1 that we use the term 'nonverbal communication' – commonly referred to as 'body language' – to describe all intentional and unintentional messages that communicate without words, such as gestures, applause, sirens and flashing lights. Nonverbal communication plays a more important role in business communication that you might realise of the chapter we'll focus on the skill of listening, which is another form of observation highly relevant in any human encounter.

Let's start by looking at this hypothetical scenario:

Blue Bulls supporters

Tim du Plessis, editor of *Beeld*, an Afrikaans newspaper published in Gauteng, reported in his editorial column of 4 June 2009 that he had attended the final Super 14 rugby game at Loftus in Pretoria the previous weekend between the Blue Bulls and the New Zealand Chiefs. He had been sitting close to the section where the radio commentators had set with their equipment. Some of the radio commentators had broadcast live in the indigenous languages of South Africa. Two rows in front of Du Plessis, three stereotypical Blue Bulls supporters had sat in their Blue Bulls jerseys. One supporter had worn a blue helmet with bull horns, another a wig with glittering blue foil, and the third a deep-blue cowboy hat. Deep into the second half of the game, a racist supporter higher up on the stand had thrown a water bottle at the black rugby commentators. Unexpectedly, the three typical Bulls supporters in front of the commentators had immediately come to the defence of the commentators and, in no uncertain terms, had sorted out the culprit. In the editorial, Du Plessis expressed his surprise at the behaviour of the three typical Blue Bulls supporters.

Activity 7.1

- Consider the scenario above:
 - Why was the editor surprised, do you think?
 - What message did the three supporters convey with their outfits?
 - What role did stereotyping play in the incident?
- Think about how you present yourself to others through your appearance, body movements, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and eye behaviour, as well as your use of space, time and touch. Ask someone close to you to describe you and your typical nonverbal behaviour to you – the way the other person perceives you.

Teaching Note

Activity 7.1 invites you to look at yourself with the eye of an outsider. This will provide you with insight into your nonverbal behaviour and into things you do not think about but that tell the world who you are.



Very often, the success of our communication depends on our awareness of our own body language and how well we 'read' the silent messages of others. Nonverbal communication plays a major role in manager-employee relationships, conflict management, interviewing and training. Because nonverbal communication varies widely between cultures, it's easy to give offence unintentionally and unconsciously (see Steinberg 2007). Let's look at some examples from around the world:

- In Japan, direct eye contact is considered rude and intrusive. Most Japanese business people feel uncomfortable in communication with Westerners who insist on maintaining eye contact.
- Many Western female students feel uneasy if Arab girls want to walk hand in hand with them.
- Western listeners nod to signal agreement, whereas Eastern people nod only to indicate they have heard and understood and not that they agree.
- British listeners stare at the speaker, blinking their eyes to indicate understanding whereas people in the United States of America are taught that it is impolite to stare.
- Saudis accept foreigners in Western business attire but are horrified by tight-fitting clothes and short sleeves.
- Spaniards indicate a receptive, friendly handshake by clasping the other person's forearm with the other hand to form a double handshake.
- Shaking hands is a greeting in North America, whereas in Turkey men often hold hands as a sign of friendship, while the Japanese avoid touching as a greeting, including handshaking, and prefer the traditional bow (see Thill & Bovée 2002; Angell 2004).
- In France people who know each other well greet with kisses on the cheeks, whereas members of the Afrikaner community in South Africa – especially in the rural areas – greet each other with a hearty, full kiss on the lips.

During your career you'll probably have to travel on business trips or receive associates from other countries. Can you see why it is so important to learn something about the nonverbal communication of your host culture or visitors?

Even emails contain nonverbal communication. Many people add nonverbal cues to their text-based messages when they are online. For example, CAPITAL LETTERS and bold type often indicate anger or frustration, and emoticons are becoming more and more common.

An emoticon is a graphic illustration that expresses feelings: a smiley, for instance, expresses happiness or pleasure. Emoticons include the following (you can see the effect more clearly if you turn your head sideways to the left):

Activity 7.2

1. Next time you are in a public place such as a coffee shop or church, or are simply strolling in a street, watch the people around you and try to determine the meaning of their body language, especially facial expressions, posture and gestures.
2. Open a newspaper or magazine and look at the people in some of the adverts before you read the accompanying text. Write a brief description of what body language message you think each is conveying.
3. Recall your first day at work or in class – make a note of the nonverbal signals you recall that encouraged you to communicate or not to communicate with the people you met.

Teaching Note

Most of the time we don't deliberately attend to the nonverbal behaviour of others – although we respond to it intuitively. Activity 7.2 will help you to pay specific attention to the nonverbal cues from others, and this will give you more insight into the people around you.

7.2 Nonverbal communication

Let's look at some important aspects of nonverbal communication:

- More than 70% of the meaning in a message is conveyed by nonverbal behaviour.
- We reveal a great deal about ourselves without saying a single word. In your career, the following, for example, will communicate messages that speak as loudly as words: your concern about being punctual for appointments with clients, the care you take to make good first impressions, and even the items you place in your office.
- Nonverbal communication can occur unintentionally. For example, you may not be aware of doing something that gives the impression that you are nervous, such as constantly pulling at a strand of hair when you are talking.
- People believe nonverbal signals even when they contradict the verbal message. This happens because these signals often convey feelings and emotions that can't be expressed in words. Imagine that, as a new employee, you are introduced to the firm's manager, who says, 'Pleased you can join us,' but carries on looking at papers on the desk. How would you do you feel?

There are three major problems with the interpretation of nonverbal communication:

1. Nonverbal messages don't always mean what people *think* they mean. The real reason that a man constantly glances at the clock during a meeting, for example, may not be that he is bored, but that his wife is in labour.
2. Nonverbal behaviour can't be interpreted in isolation. If a person scratches his or her head, for example, this could indicate dandruff, uncertainty, forgetfulness or lies, depending on the other gestures used and on the circumstances in which the actions take

- The meaning of nonverbal messages can vary from culture to culture, as we discussed earlier. In a multicultural country such as South Africa, attaching fixed meanings to nonverbal signs without taking the cultural context into account often results in misunderstanding and the creation of stereotypes (Steinberg 2007). Consider the simple example of eye contact, and you'll see how important it could be for success of your career to be aware of this:

- In some Eastern and African cultures, dropping your eyes in conversation with a superior is regarded as a sign of respect.
- In Western cultures, little or no eye contact is often interpreted as an indication of boredom, a lack of concentration, or a feeling of inferiority.

Activity 7.3

Answer the following questions honestly:

- To what extent do first impressions influence your judgement of others?
- Do you find it difficult to change your first impression even when you get to know a person better?
- How do your own beliefs about nonverbal behaviour influence your relationships with people of different cultures? Can you remember occasions when these beliefs may have been inaccurate?
- An old stereotype about short men suggests that they are aggressive. This makes some people begin any conversation with a short man on the basis of that stereotype. Do you find yourself using nonverbal stereotypes to judge other people?
- Comment on the following quotation: 'When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another, a practised man relies on the language of the first' - Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

Teaching Note

Activity 7.3 encourages you to question your intuitive reactions to nonverbal cues. Are you inclined to stereotype or can you deliberately question your perceptions and the categories in which you place people?



7.2.1 Functions of nonverbal communication

Let's take a look at the many functions of nonverbal communication:

- Nonverbal communication reinforces a verbal message when it adds to its meaning.

For example:

A mother telling her child to 'Stop that now' conveys a stronger message than the simple

Pounding your hand on the table when saying, 'Listen to me,' conveys a more effective message than the words alone. Very often, our reinforcing of a message is not deliberate; we do it without conscious thought or intent.

- Nonverbal communication complements a verbal message when it conveys the same meaning. For example:

If you wish someone happy birthday and accompany the words with a warm smile, your tone of voice and facial expression are complementing the verbal message.

- Nonverbal communication contradicts a verbal message when we say one thing, but do another (research has shown that, in most cases, people tend to believe the nonverbal rather than the words spoken). For example:

A clerk about to write an examination says he is not nervous, despite the fact that his hands are trembling and his forehead is perspiring.

- Nonverbal communication replaces a verbal message when we use gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues to generate meaning. For example:

You wave your hand to someone instead of saying hello, or roll your eyes to show that you disapprove of a colleague's statement.

- Nonverbal communication regulates the flow of verbal interaction when we use eye contact, tone of voice, a nod of the head or slight hand movements to tell others when to talk, to repeat a statement, to hurry up, or to finish the conversation. For example:

The chairperson at a meeting uses eye contact or hand gestures instead of words to indicate whose turn it is to speak.

The manager who picks up the newspaper when you come into his office with a message is indicating that he does not wish to communicate (see Steinberg 2007; Knapp 1990; Verderber 1990).

Activity 7.4

- What use do you make of body movements when you speak?

Teaching Note

It is an interesting exercise to examine your own nonverbal behaviour and to become aware of how you convey meaning nonverbally. Activity 7.4 encourages this. Ideally, you would like the receivers of your messages to understand them as you intended. Could you improve this mutual understanding by using nonverbal cues more deliberately?



7.2.2 Categories of nonverbal communication

Your culture and the research

Research about nonverbal communication has been done mainly in North America and Britain. Therefore, many of the examples of nonverbal communication we'll discuss in this section are relevant to Western cultures. Please feel free to disagree with any assertions we make if they do not coincide with the meanings of a particular nonverbal sign in your culture.

For the purposes of our discussion, we'll group the range of nonverbal behaviour into seven general categories:

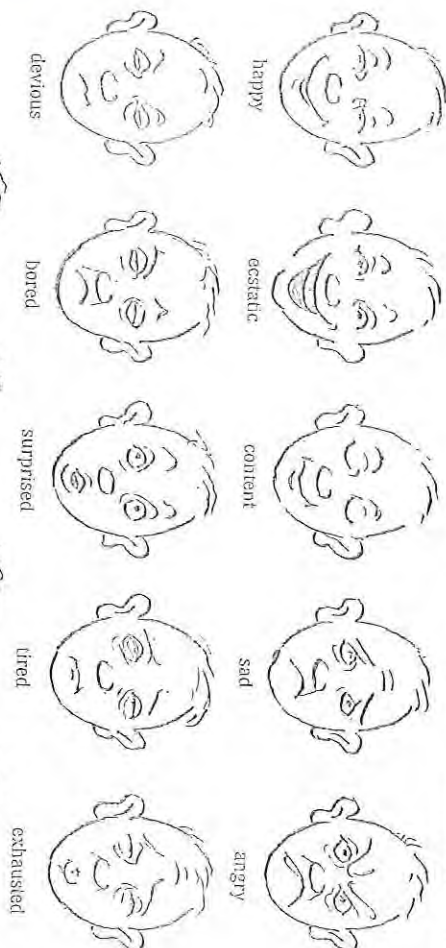
1. **Facial expression and eye contact.** The face is made up of dozens of muscles which make it capable of expressing a huge range of emotions, sometimes involuntarily, and even unconsciously. Examples are anger, fear, irritation, embarrassment, happiness, amusement, disgust, and so on. We use our faces to communicate disapproval by scowling, and raise our eyebrows to express doubt. Remember, however, that people can simulate an emotion they do not feel or hide their true feelings. While the meaning of some nonverbal behaviour is interpreted differently from culture to culture, some facial expressions are understood around the globe. But more subtle facial expressions – such as disgust, surprise or embarrassment – may vary across cultures (see Ellis & McClintock 1990). For example:

- In North America, embarrassment is normally shown by blushing.
- In Japan, embarrassment is shown by laughter and giggling.
- Arab people show embarrassment by slightly sticking out their tongues.

The eyes are particularly effective for communicating attention and interest, influencing others, regulating interaction, and establishing dominance. Let's look at some examples:

- People who never look up during an oral presentation send a message that they are nervous.
- Speakers who do look at their audience during a speech come across as confident and in control.
- In meetings, making eye contact often communicates interest and attentiveness and indicates an employee's desire to participate in a discussion. Avoiding eye contact, in contrast, is often interpreted as lack of interest and disrespect.

It has been reported that men often fail to show that they are interested by using head nods and eye contact. This explains why some women employees complain that their male supervisors never seem interested when they want to discuss a problem. Often it is not that the man is not interested; he just does not show it with his nonverbal behaviour.



Facial expressions around the world
Source: J.V. Thill & C.L. Bovee, 2002. *Excellence in Business Communication* (5th ed.), Prentice Hall, New Jersey:38

Activity 7.5

1. Briefly explain how the human face would appear in order to signal each of the following emotions: anger, fear, irritation, embarrassment, happiness, amusement, disgust.
2. Ask your fellow students or your family to guess the emotions you are expressing by miming three of the following: anger, fear, irritation, embarrassment, happiness, amusement, disgust.

Teaching Note

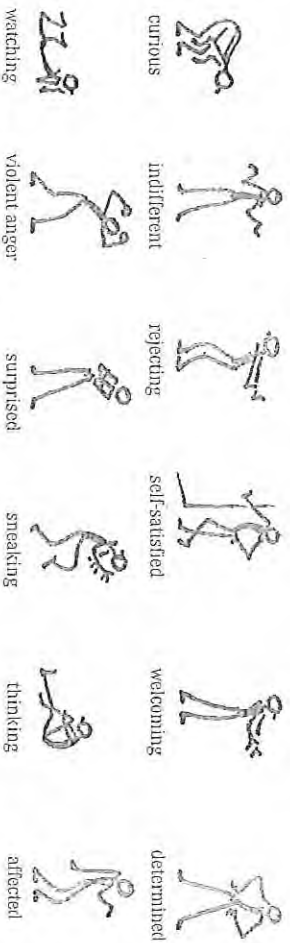
Good stage and screen actors can accurately and credibly represent the characters they play. Sir Anthony Hopkins, for example, was convincing both as the evil Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* and the deeply religious and sincere CS Lewis in *Shadowlands*. Much of the characterisation...

2. **Gestures and posture.** Gestures are signals we give by our hands, fingers and arms, generally, and communicate both voluntary and involuntary messages. Most gestures are voluntary. But what about gestures like sneezing and yawning? These are involuntary gestures – we make these without meaning to do so. The way we sit, stand, slump or slouch are all signals that reveal whether we feel confident or nervous, friendly or hostile, assertive or passive, powerful or powerless. Hand gestures are commonly used to describe or emphasise a verbal description or to communicate attitudes. For example:

- In a conversation, crossing your arms generally conveys a less aggressive attitude than putting your hands on your hips.
- Leaning forward usually conveys a positive attitude towards the other person, while leaning backwards could be interpreted negatively.
- Sitting with your head in your hands often indicates that you are feeling low, whereas others may interpret your sitting with your feet on your desk as a sign of your feeling superior.

Activity 7.6

1. What do you understand by the following gestures?
 - a. Someone tapping his or her fingers on the table or desk
 - b. Someone slapping a friend's back
 - c. Someone scratching his or her chin or head
2. Watch a group of your co-workers, at a water fountain for example, and see what messages they convey through their gestures and posture. On TV, watch people – caught in a war-zone, for example, or at a rock concert. What does their posture tell you?
3. Imagine that in a job interview the prospective employee slouches in the chair and uses jerky body movements. If you were the interviewer, how would you interpret such nonverbal behaviour?
4. Look at the stick figure notations of body postures in the figure below and see if you agree with the interpretations that describe them.



What messages are the stick figures sending?

3. **Touching behaviour.** Physical contact with others is the most basic form of communication. It conveys warmth, comfort and reassurance and communicates information about the nature of the relationship between people. For example:

- We may pat people on the back to calm them down when they are angry.
- We may grab a person's elbow to attract his or her attention.
- In a business environment, touching suggests dominance – a higher-status person is more likely to touch a lower-status person than the other way round. But be careful about how you use touching behaviour – it may be misinterpreted as sexual harassment.
- A handshake also communicates clues about self-image: a firm handshake creates a better first impression than a weak handshake.

Whether or not we often reach out to touch other people is often determined by our gender, age and cultural influences. Within a culture as diverse as South Africa's, various subcultures may develop their own norms.

Research on intercultural communication often makes a distinction between high-contact cultures and low-contact cultures. For example:

- Members of high-contact cultures touch each other more often, sit or stand closer to each other, make more eye contact, and speak more loudly. French, Italian, Latin-American, Russian, Arab, and African cultures are some high-contact cultures.
- Members of low-contact cultures touch each other less often, maintain more interpersonal distance, and are more indirect in facing each other and in their eye contact. They also tend to use a lower, softer tone of voice. German, Danish and East Asian cultures are seen as low-contact cultures.
- Moderate-contact cultures include the United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada (Ting-Toomey 1999; Tubbs & Moss 2003).

Activity 7.7

Observe people of different cultures in your organisation and draw your own conclusions about their use of touch.

Teaching Note

Observing people's use of touch and their use of personal space will tell you that, broadly speaking, it can be related to cultural groups. However, this is sometimes also highly individual. What behaviours can you see?

4. **Use of time.** Think about leaving a message for a colleague. If he or she doesn't respond for three days, how do you interpret this? Time is another reflection of status: the higher our status, the more control we have over time. Those with status can keep others waiting. They also have more control over their work schedules than do others. The timing of communication is equally important. However well we communicate a message, if we give it too early others may forget it or see it as meaningless. What about giving it too late? If an organisation's management, for instance, releases information too late, the grapevine is likely to swing into action and rumours and misinformation will spread, for example regarding proposed mergers and other organisational changes.
- People from different cultures view time differently. For example:

- In most industrial societies (such as those of North America, Japan, and Germany) time is money and high productivity is important. Arriving late for a meeting or being consistently late for work sends a negative message.
- In some Middle Eastern and African cultures, expectations about arrival and departure times are less rigid. Being 20 to 30 minutes late for a meeting is acceptable because the pace is more relaxed.

Employers and employees of different cultures are often confused by the other's conception of punctuality.

ACTIVITY 7.8

In your culture, what sort of impression does being 30 minutes late for an appointment with your manager convey?

Teaching Note

Activity 7.8 again shows that we should be careful not to generalise and stereotype. Former President Nelson Mandela, for example, is known for his insistence on punctuality.



5. **Use of space.** Are you aware that your use of space communicates information about you? Think about people who sit far from the head of a table at a meeting, for example. The general interpretation of this is that they are reluctant to participate in the proceedings by voicing opinions. However, a person who sits in this position may simply have arrived late and be occupying the only remaining empty seat!

Space signals status and power. In large organisations, as many as 20 junior employees may work in small spaces with partitions to separate their desks. Managers often work in little cubicles to give them a small measure of privacy. In your career, the higher up you

- An organisation's president or CEO and vice-presidents – perhaps six people in all – often occupy the whole top floor of the an organisation's building, with large offices and comfortable furniture.
- Senior managers usually have larger offices and desks than juniors have.

Research shows that it is more difficult to conduct business or communicate with someone who sits behind a desk. This is why managers try to arrange their office furniture so that they can sit next to, rather than opposite, a visitor, or make use of a small conference room for the duration of the meeting. Generally, it makes for better communication for three or six people to sit around a round table rather than a rectangular table.

Space can also determine how comfortable people feel talking with each other. For example:

- People from Western cultures like to keep a distance of about one-and-a-half metres when they conduct business in interpersonal encounters.
- When a person from another culture wants to conduct business within a much smaller space than you're used to, your feeling crowded might create problems, whereas the other person might interpret your use of space as an indication that you are cold and distant.

ACTIVITY 7.9

Imagine that a co-worker stands too close to you when discussing work and/or personal problems. This makes you feel very uncomfortable. Think about whether you would try to cover up your feelings or whether you would tell your co-worker about your discomfort.

Teaching Note

In Chapter 1 we introduced the idea of putting yourself in the shoes of others and understanding how others perceive the world. Activity 7.9 helps to show that dealing with others' nonverbal behaviour also requires understanding others' motives and ways of dealing with reality. Being sensitive to other peoples' nonverbal behaviour is characteristic of a good communicator. In Chapter 8 you'll learn about the concept of empathy, which also applies in this situation.



6. **Personal appearance.** Western cultures place a high value on physical appearance. Most of us form first impressions of others based on physical appearance. Clothing and personal appearance communicate nonverbal messages in the business environment as well.

For example:

If you are inappropriately dressed at a job interview, the interviewer may pay little attention to your qualifications because your appearance conveys the wrong message: jeans and a T-shirt will indicate that your attitude is not right for the job! The interviewer is guilty of stereotyping and may be entirely wrong, but the damage has been done.

Research shows that – unfair as it seems – tall, thin, attractive people have an advantage in both social and work situations (Staley & Staley 1992:419). Such people are perceived to be more persuasive, get more support when they need it, and enjoy more work opportunities and bigger salaries.

Appearance is considered so important in the business world that many large organisations have a strict dress code, which lays downs rules for the style and colour of clothing that employees may wear, as well as the personal grooming. To be successful at work, you'll need to be aware of what is considered appropriate and make sure that your personal style and taste are in tune with the culture of the organisation in which you work. However, the term 'appropriately dressed' needs to be interpreted in its cultural context. For example:

At a social event such as an office end-of-year party, a suit and tie or jeans and a sweatshirt – depending on the formality of the occasion – might be appropriate dress for Western men, but traditional dress might be appropriate for people of other cultures.

The personal items we wear or keep close to us are another important aspect of physical appearance. What is considered appropriate at your place of employment? Until you find out, keep jewellery to a minimum if you're a woman and avoid earrings and bracelets altogether if you're a man.



Activity 7.10

What is the dress code in different organisations? What are employees wearing in:

1. a supermarket
 2. a bank
 3. government offices (for example those of SARS).
- Note the uniforms (or lack thereof).

Teaching Note

Activity 7.10 aims to alert you to dress codes in organisations. But again, be careful not to judge people solely on their appearance. Recall how the stereotypical Blue Bulls supporters acted in a surprising way in the scenario in the beginning of the chapter.

7.

Paralanguage. One of the major differences between spoken and written communication that we can alter our tone of voice or add emphasis to particular words. Like your gesture and facial expressions, the sound of your voice carries both intentional and unintentional messages. Paralanguage is about how we say something rather than what the words mean. The pitch (the highness or lowness of the voice), volume (how loud or soft the voice is), rate or tempo (the speed at which the speak) and quality of the voice (how pleasant or unpleasant the voice sounds) express a variety of different meanings and emotions. For example:

- A loud voice is often associated with aggressiveness.
- People who speak quickly are often said to be nervous.
- Excessive use of sounds and words such as 'uh', 'er', 'well', and 'you know' can become a problem and interrupt a listener's concentration and comprehension.
- When addressing a group of co-workers, vary the pitch and tempo of your speech and emphasise key words to help maintain their interest and attention.

Activity 7.11

Comment on the following scenario:

Maria was very upset when she went to a college in Johannesburg and some of her fellow students teased her about her accent. She had never thought of herself as having an accent because in the Free State everyone spoke English the way she does. People not only made fun of her accent, but they had all those other stereotypes about 'Vrystaters' being aggressive bullies who are only interested in rugby and sheep farming. She found it really hard to get anyone to judge her on her merits.

Teaching Note

There's always a danger that stereotypes will inform your judgement – and you'll have to be careful not to fall in the trap. Activity 7.11 aims to help you avoid it. People sometimes have highly individual ways of acting or speaking. The challenge is to look for ways in which their behaviour changes so as to come to conclusions about what their behaviour means.



Activity 7.12

1. How would you interpret a raised voice?
2. How would you interpret a low voice?
3. Turn down the sound on the television set and watch a sitcom for about 10 minutes. Can you work out what is happening from the body language of the actors?
4. Say 'Really!' so that it means:
 - a. I don't believe you.
 - b. That's amazing!
 - c. That isn't what I've heard.
 - d. I totally agree (Wood 2003).

Teaching Note

Activity 7.12 aims to sensitise you to the ways in which voice and paralanguage convey meaning.

We usually respond intuitively to what we believe a person has said. But think about listening to people speaking in a language other than their first language. Be careful here: a person's intonation may convey to you a different meaning from what he or she intends.



Tips for improving nonverbal communication

The greatest problem about nonverbal communication is that most of us don't pay sufficient attention to our own and other people's use of it. The following tips reiterate useful points:

- Pay more attention to both the verbal and nonverbal communication of others – *what* people say and *how* they say it.
- Be aware that people may deliberately give false nonverbal signals.
- Interpret nonverbal behaviour in the context in which it is used.
- Be alert to cultural differences when giving meaning to nonverbal behaviour.
- Try to avoid giving conflicting signals – verbal and nonverbal communication should match.
- Make a conscious effort to be aware of your gestures, posture and eye contact.
- Try to use appropriate paralanguage to avoid giving unintentional messages.
- Dress appropriately for the occasion.
- Be aware of space in cross-cultural situations.
- Be aware of varying attitudes to time.

- People often do not know that they are, for example, swinging their feet or saying 'OK' or 'Well you know ...' too often. Ask your colleagues to tell you about any distracting mannerisms you have, of which you may not be aware. Make a conscious effort to avoid these (Steinberg 2007).

7.2.3 Nonverbal communication in written texts

People usually see nonverbal communication as applicable only to face-to-face encounters with someone else – or a group of people. However, much of the communication in the workplace – and even on a social level – is written. Think of an SMS message on a cell phone, Mxit messages to and from friends, email messages and the messages on the wall of a Facebook user. All these messages are in the form of texts. As a student, you submit written assignments and answer examination questions, and as an accountant you'll need to write reports and, eventually, contribute to your organisation's annual report – or take responsibility for it. Many chartered accountants become financial directors or CEOs of large companies – and have to take responsibility for much of the communication in their organisations. Most of it is in written texts that are delivered in hard copy or electronically. Many people receiving your written messages may never meet you in person, but they'll know you from the texts you generate.

Lecturers at distance-education institutions don't meet many of their students in person, but they get to know them from what they say about themselves in their email messages and assignments or from how they respond in the online discussion forums. Psychologists have a long tradition of analysing texts generated by their patients (using projective techniques) and getting a good understanding by doing so. In addition, much can be said about people's handwriting and the way they convey meaning beyond the words that are on the paper. Even in this era of electronic communication, an intimate message to a loved one carries much more weight if it is a handwritten message on a thoughtfully selected card.

What and *how* you write will say more about you than you may think. Think about the texts that you receive every day: in reading each message, you read 'between the lines'. The conclusions you come to about the contents and the writers are not limited simply to the meaning conveyed by the neutral words on the page or screen.

To survive in a competitive environment, organisations and companies (big and small) spend a lot of resources on creating a positive image and reputation for themselves and their services and products. For example:

- Brand imaging has been refined to a highly sophisticated science to ensure that consumers and customers have a clear image in their minds. Much time and money is spent on getting the names of organisations to stand out and be recognisable – this is why consistency in stationery and all communication from an organisation is of the utmost importance.
- We're all exposed to the advertising and other communication efforts of organisations – the texts of adverts contain nonverbal cues to us to make value judgements on those organisations. The nonverbal cues inform the mental pictures we build of organisations and

Similarly, on a personal level, we spend time and money on creating our own image. The clothes we wear, our hairstyles, and the way we talk and build relationships are directed towards portraying an image of ourselves to the world. However, many of us do not take the same care about the way we portray ourselves in the texts we generate.

The meanings we get from written messages are related to **form and content**. In Chapters 2 to 6 you learnt about the use of language in different contexts. In this section, we don't aim to give you all the technical skills to produce professional texts, as complete volumes have been published on each aspect of this. You could study them if you're interested in learning more. Also available are many business communication guidelines for optimising email messages and writing business letters and reports or other types of business communication texts. In this section we aim to *sensitise* you to the nonverbal meanings that texts you may generate will inevitably create. We'll also provide basic tips for conveying intentional nonverbal cues.

We'll discuss the form and the content of messages separately. Let's start by looking at two important aspects of the form of messages:

1. **Layout.** This is important not only in formal printed documents such as advertising or colour brochures for products. In your everyday life, you need to consider the layout of your texts, for example exam answers, an email to your parents to request an increase in your allowance, or a request to a lecturer to grant you an extension on submitting an assignment.

In a business context, you'll be receiving messages from many quarters and you'll have to produce messages.

The first principle of layout is to ensure that your text is well organised and that your document reflects this. Many business people receive literally hundreds of emails every day, so we'll use the example of email to illustrate this first principle of layout:

- Choose the subject line carefully. The biggest source of frustration with email is often that the description in the subject line doesn't represent the contents of the message – or is even left blank.
- Use headings, bullets and other organisation techniques. The recipient of an email who starts reading a message and doesn't know where it's going has a problem – use headings and bullets and similar techniques to ensure that you systematically organise the content of the message. The reader will immediately know what the structure of the argument is. Without these techniques, the reader has to struggle through a story and try to make head or tail of it.
- After reading your email, the reader should know exactly what the purpose of the message was and whether if he or she needs to act on it. The form of your message will tell the receiver whether you are an organised person and capable of understanding and reflecting this by organising detail.

The second principle of layout is to use the layout of a page to maximise meaning. A natural way of thinking is to use categorisation to make sense of information. You can facilitate this process in the reader by doing the categorisation yourself. One way of doing this is use tables and other graphic tools to present information. The way you produce the text (be it exam answers or a sensitive report to the CEO of a business) will reflect how you understand the material and are able to represent your ideas. If you organise it sensibly using graphic tools and present it so that the layout facilitates understanding, the chance are much better that the recipient will understand your message in the way you intend.

Use space on the page sensibly. The way text and graphics occupy space will also convey meaning and facilitate understanding. On the one hand, if everything is cramped with very little white space left, the reader will feel uncomfortable. On the other, leaving too much white space will drag the message out and tire the reader.

If you can use a picture to complement the text appropriately, do so (as the saying goes 'A picture is worth a thousand words' – when it's used correctly). However, bear in mind that any picture may invite a variety of interpretations. By using a caption, you can limit the interpretations a picture may elicit.

2. **Typeface.** Typeface is an important factor to consider when you use electronic or printed means to produce a text. Literally thousands of typefaces are available to anyone using a computer to generate texts. There are two broad categories of typeface – 'serif' (characterised by small finishing strokes that guide the reader's eye from letter to letter) and 'sans serif' ('sans' is French for 'without'). Table 7.1 shows examples:

Table 7.1 The two broad categories of typeface: some examples

Serif typeface	Sans serif typeface
Courier	Ariel
Times New Roman	Tahoma
Garamond	Century Gothic

Usually, serif type is used for the body of text – and most books are printed in a serif type because it enhances the readability of the text. Sans serif type is mostly used for headings and subheadings. Research has also shown that people attach meaning to typeface. Typeface carries the personality of publications such as magazines and newspapers. Using more than two different typefaces in one document can be distracting and confusing for a reader. Make sure that you use typeface consistently, usually using serif typeface for the body of the text, make it easily readable and sans serif typeface for eye-catching headings.

Because there are so many typefaces to choose from, typeface use can be highly individualised – and your choice of typeface will be part of the way in which you want to project

distract from the content of the message. Play around with typefaces and select for your message a typeface that suits your personality but won't compromise the message's readability. Also consider the size of your typeface. Body text is usually between 10 and 14 points in size. Sizes of more than 14 points can be seen as display type, so reserve them for headings and subheadings. However, for PowerPoint presentations, use type no smaller than 24 points, ideally 36 points, and larger sizes for headings.

We've mentioned the effect of capital letters before. Use capital letters and lower case letters sensibly. The example below illustrates why this is necessary:

TEXT SET ENTIRELY IN CAPITAL LETTERS IS DIFFICULT TO READ, SO AVOID USING FULL CAPITALISATION. IN ADDITION, IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION THE USE OF CAPITAL LETTERS IS SEEN AS THE EQUIVALENT OF SCREAMING AT SOMEONE.

Also use bold, italic and underlined text with discretion. The following are examples of aspects to consider:

- **Bold type** is used mainly for headings and also for emphasis.
- *Italics* can be used to indicate quotations, names of publications or organisations or brands, or for emphasis.
- Avoid using underlined text. In Chapter 2 you learnt about the importance of word recognition in the reading process. Readers recognise words by their shape, and underlining a word obscures the form of the word.

The discussion above clearly doesn't exhaustively cover the intricacies of typography. The idea is to make you aware of the possibilities typography offers in everyday communication. The nonverbal cues your use of these elements provides will tell your audience more about you and the way you operate.

Now let's turn from discussing form to consider the content of messages. In Chapters 2 to 6, you read about dealing with language and how to structure the content of messages – including formulating persuasive messages. The purpose of the discussion of the content of messages here is to make you aware of the way in which the content of your messages may convey nonverbal cues. Two important aspects of content are clarity and tone:

1. **Tone.** The tone of your message will convey much about you – in a similar way to that in which your verbal communication reflects your personality and mood. Tone refers to politeness, positivity, friendliness and the way the reader is addressed in the message. In a face-to-face situation we have to acknowledge the other person as a human being and treat

- **Threatening.** I am hereby informing you that you may not do any outside work without my explicit and written permission.
- **Acceptable.** Please get my written permission before doing outside work.

All communication is purposeful and for the message to be received in good faith, we rely on the goodwill of the receiver. The tone of a message reflects the conscience and character of the writer and his or her attitude towards the people receiving the message. A writer must show respect for the reader – not only in the way the message is formula but also in the way it is organised. It is possible to demonstrate distrust by the way in which you give an instruction, for example by giving too much detail about how to execute procedure, in a message to someone who is familiar with it.

Avoid using messages via electronic communication media – such as email or SMS – a substitution for interpersonal communication when you do not have the courage to face person to convey a message. If you need to convey an unpleasant message, it is best to do it in person if at all possible. Breaking news of a retrenchment, for example, via SMS is a certain way to lose the respect of all employees.

2. **Clarity.** The clarity of written messages is extremely important. The following sign next a lift in a high-rise building suggests why this is necessary:

PLEASE
WALK UP ONE FLOOR
WALK DOWN TWO FLOORS
FOR IMPROVED ELEVATOR SERVICE

When formulating messages, consider the frame of reference (we discussed this in the first section of Chapter 1) of the audience. Be specific and if you aren't sure, test the message on someone.

Use positive language rather than speaking in the negative. For example:

- **Positive language.** Switch off the computer when leaving work.
- **Negative language.** Do not leave the computer on when you leave work.

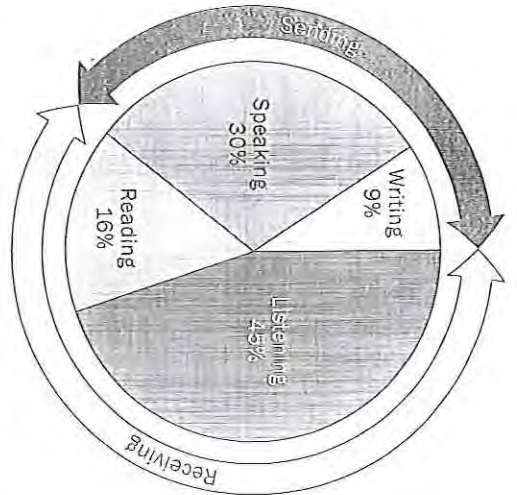
This section on the nonverbal communication messages conveyed by written texts aims to make you aware that the way you write messages will tell people about you. Your reader will see whether you are enthusiastic about your topic and life in general and whether you have respect for the people reading your messages. What message does your written

7.3 Listening

A vital aspect of business communication is knowing when to be silent and when to listen to other people. Successful managers listen carefully to both internal and external communication so that they can constantly improve their businesses. The figure alongside shows that business people spend more of their communication time receiving information than transmitting it.

We use the telephone, attend lectures and meetings, participate in arguments, give and receive instructions, listen to the news on the radio or television, and make decisions based on oral information. As a business manager or employee, you'll have to listen to customers, clients, suppliers and stockholders as they contact you concerning complaints, requests, improvements and needs. Yet, most of us do not listen actively. Have you ever been in a situation where you say something like, "The trouble with my boss is that she never listens. She is only interested in her way of doing things. Her favourite expression is, "No, I'll tell you how we'll do this."

Researchers have found that people listen at or below a 25% efficiency rate and remember only about half of what is said in a 10-minute conversation. But listening does not always require ears! Learning to listen efficiently to nonverbal and verbal messages will enhance your communication skills. People who use their listening skills help build employee morale, streamline business procedures and practices, meet changing consumer needs and enhance client relationships (see Gamble & Gamble 1987; 1998; Thill & Bovee 2002).



Business people spend more of their communication time receiving information than transmitting it

Activity 7.13

Comment on the following conversation between two people who work in the same department.

- Lizette: Don't throw those documents away. I haven't scanned them into the computer yet.
 Reuben: Okay. Were you invited to Carla's birthday lunch today?
 Lizette: Yes. Who else is going?
 Reuben: I'm not sure.
 Lizette: I'll ask Peter - he's bound to know.
 Lizette (a little later): Peter says there are 10 of us going to lunch. Better give me those documents now so that I can scan them before we go.

- Lizette: But I did tell you!
 Reuben: When?
 Lizette: Just 10 minutes ago.
 Reuben: Oh, I didn't hear you.

Teaching Note

By analysing the communication encounter in Activity 7.13, you'll realise that there are many reasons why people don't listen carefully and can't distinguish between real issues and things that simply distract from the essence of a message.

Listening is often explained by distinguishing it from hearing:

- Hearing is a *passive* involuntary process in which the brain receives sounds. Unless you have a hearing impairment, you will hear sounds but you may not be consciously aware them, for example the hum of your computer.
 - Listening is an *active* process in which you not only hear the message, but you also demonstrate that you have understood and interpreted it. You pay attention to the facts and opinions that are expressed (the verbal message), as well as to the speaker's feelings (the nonverbal message). You show that you are listening by providing both verbal and nonverbal feedback.
- Active listening takes more effort than hearing and is a skill that you'll need to practise

- Listening opportunities in business occur not only in face-to-face conversations, but also during conferences, training sessions, interviews, problem-solving meetings and team planning meetings. Listening accurately is essential if you want to:
- understand a complex situation;
 - recognise the emotions underlying an issue;
 - understand the other person's perspective on an issue;
 - determine the needs and problems of clients;
 - solve problems involving both people and work;
 - work effectively with others (see *Access series* 2003).

The following are examples of poor listening habits:

- trying to remember everything that is said instead of listening for key points and ideas;
- not listening to your juniors or to people of another culture because you think their knowledge is inferior to yours;
- jumping to conclusions or interrupting the speaker before you have heard all the facts because you have strong personal views about the topic;
- not concentrating because you are thinking about what you are going to do later on;
- not providing your partner with the feedback that tells him or her that you are interested in

- fidgeting while someone else is talking. (Scratching your head, pulling on your earlobe or checking your cell phone while someone is talking conveys the nonverbal message that you are not interested in the conversation and are not listening attentively.)

7.3.1 Types of listening

We don't always listen in the same way. We often listen purely for relaxation and enjoyment (to music, to our favourite television programme, or to a friend telling a humorous story, for example). We listen in other ways too, however. Let's look at various types of listening, which will give an idea of the different levels at which we listen:

- **Listening for content.** The goal of listening for content is to understand and remember information. You may ask questions but most of the communication flows from the speaker to you. Whether you agree or disagree with the message is not important – only that you understand it. The more efficient your listening skills, the more accurate will be the information you gather. For example, the primary goal of the clerk receiving a manager's instructions is to understand and retain the information so as to carry out the instructions correctly. In business, information is also frequently exchanged over the telephone – appointments are scheduled and products ordered. In the business world, listening is often seen in terms of rands and cents. Errors due to inefficient listening cost money. Imagine what the total cost to the economy would be if every worker in a company like Anglo American made a R100 listening error every day for a month.

- **Critical listening.** The goal of critical listening is to understand and evaluate the message, especially when you suspect that the communicator may be biased. You need to consider whether the content is logical, the evidence (such as statistics) supports the content, the conclusions are valid, and the implications of the message for you and your organisation. Importantly, you must think about the speaker's intentions and motives, and whether any important or relevant information has been omitted. You listen critically, for example, when a sales representative gives a presentation extolling the virtues of a new product – you evaluate whether the content is valid and what the implications are for your next order. You also listen critically when interviewing prospective job applicants to assess their suitability for a job.

- **Empathic listening or reflective listening.** The goal of empathic listening is to understand the speaker's feelings and needs from their point of view, even if you do not share their perspective. You listen carefully, making sure that you do not criticise or offer advice so that the other person can express emotions. You also 'listen' to the feelings expressed nonverbally rather than verbally. You listen empathically when, for example, a colleague tells you about the dressing down she has had from her senior manager – even though you think she has deserved it – because she needs to express her frustration to a sympathetic listener. You may also have to listen empathically to customers' complaints, for example about late delivery or inferior quality of a product. In empathic listening, very

7.3.2 Barriers to efficient listening

The problem in all types of listening is that a variety of barriers can hamper our effectiveness as listeners. If you are aware of these barriers you can try to overcome them:

- **External noise** can be distracting: ringing telephones, fax machines, conversations going on around you, the clicking of computer keyboards, and so on. If you've ever tried to pay attention to instructions while your boss has constantly stopped speaking to answer the phone, you'll know the extent to which environmental noises can affect attention and memory.
- **Internal noise** consists of the type of distractions we discussed in Chapter 1. If, for instance, you see yourself as cleverer than other people, with nothing to gain from listening to them, you create a psychological barrier. Personal prejudices about the communicator's appearance, status, style of speaking, and subject matter can prevent us from listening attentively – for example, someone who thinks that a man wearing an earring is a dropout, that a woman knows nothing about economics, won't listen attentively to them.
- **Cultural barriers** can also prevent efficient listening. For example:

- Sometimes people have so much difficulty understanding someone with a foreign accent that they give up trying to listen. In this situation, make the effort to concentrate and ask questions to make sure that you have understood the message.
- Evidence suggests that men listen more to the verbal content of a message, whereas women tend to listen more for the emotional tone and other nonverbal aspects of the message. Try to listen for both facts and feelings.
- Bias about someone of a different culture can occur if it is thought they don't know enough about the topic of the conversation. Try to avoid this: in other words, judge the message, not the person.

Activity 7.14

What do you understand by the term 'cultural noise'? Explain why it can be a listening barrier.

Teaching Note

Activity 7.14 aims to help you to become aware of issues that can distract from listening to the real meaning of a message. Many such issues impact on your ability to interpret messages correctly. This awareness will also assist you to understand that your messages may, in a similar way, be misrepresented and not well understood because people may not listen carefully. To be successful, you'll need to provide for this possibility.

7.3.3 Developing efficient listening skills

Efficient listening seems difficult to people who have never tried it. It is indeed easier *not* to listen efficiently – we have to motivate ourselves to listen *actively*.



Table 7.2 Active listening skills

Attending skills	Following skills	Reflecting skills
<p>These are the skills that show another person that you are prepared and willing to listen. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using body language that shows you are paying attention (e.g. facing the person, looking interested) Appropriate eye contact Minimising outside distractions and noise (e.g. turning off a radio or television, moving from a corridor into an office). 	<p>These skills show that you are interested in what is being said and encourage the person to expand on the message. The skills include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate eye contact to open the conversation (e.g. 'Do you want to tell me about...?') Minimal feedback to encourage the speaker (e.g. the short words or sounds that people often use in a conversation almost automatically) (e.g. 'mm', 'yes', 'right') Attentive silences Infrequent questions. 	<p>These are the skills that show you not only have heard what has been said but also understand the feelings and intentions of the message. You can show this by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restating the essential parts of what has been said (useful if it is a long and complicated issue because it ensures that you have understood correctly) Reflecting feelings and content back at the speaker (e.g. 'You seem upset about what happened.') Summarising the major points, topics or concerns.

Source: Access series, 2003. *Communication for Business*. McGraw-Hill, Australia: 17

Activity 7.15

- Are you listening actively in a meeting when your cell phone rings and you say, 'Carry on. I'm listening - I'll just answer this call quickly.' How can you demonstrate to a speaker that you are listening actively?
- How do you feel about people who talk on cell phones while they are driving?

Teaching Note

What kind of listener are you? Activity 7.15 aims to make you aware of the benefits of being an active listener. You may then become more aware of the listening strategies (or lack thereof) of others. People also need to listen to you - how will you ensure that people listen to and correctly interpret your messages?



Activity 7.16

Let's put together everything you have learned in this chapter. Do this activity with a colleague. Think of a scenario in which a customer has a complaint about a product or service or an employee complains about the careless work done by a colleague. Role-play the situation making sure that you:

- use appropriate nonverbal behaviour;
- show understanding by paraphrasing;
- listen actively to what it being said;
- ask questions to clarify the problem;
- display empathy.

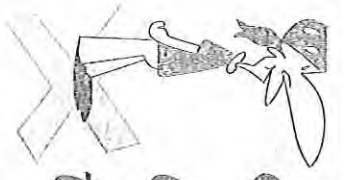
Teaching Note

Reading about the issues in this chapter (or even learning its contents for an examination) won't be enough to enhance your communication capabilities. Be actively aware of people's nonverbal behaviour and constantly observe, apply and practise the skills taught in this chapter. Only then will it become ingrained and part of your communication make-up. Activity 7.16 aims to help you do this.



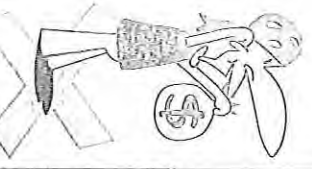
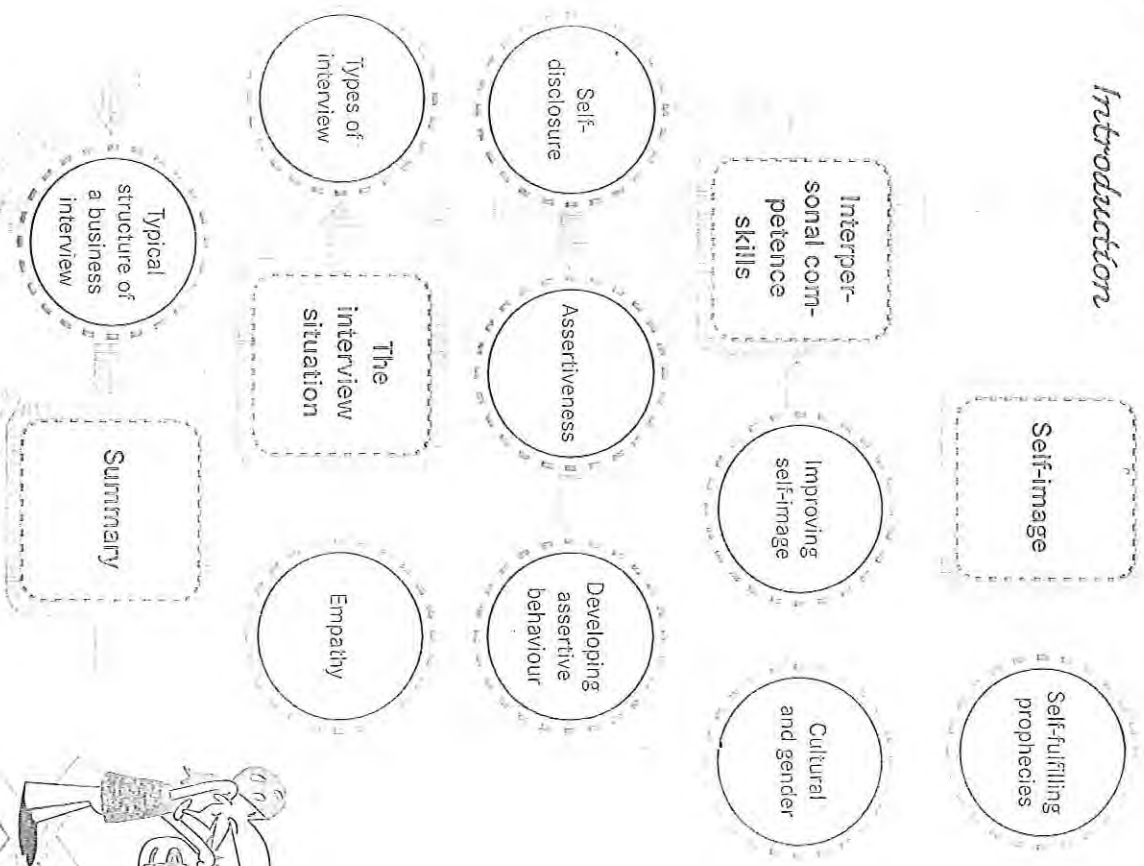
7.4 Summary

Nonverbal communication includes all the ways in which we communicate without words, from hand gestures and facial expressions to sirens and flashing lights. Nonverbal communication conveys meaning both intentionally (for example frowning at a naughty child) and unintentionally (for example failing to respond to a friendly wave in a crowd because you didn't spot it). Nonverbal communication can be culturally specific - if, for example, you feel embarrassed about raising your voice in a public place that may be because of your cultural identity. Nonverbal communication fulfils specific functions, from, for example, emphasising your point with a hand gesture to, for instance, regulating the conversation by looking at your watch to indicate that you need to move on. Nonverbal messages are also conveyed in written texts in both the form (layout) and content (tone) of the messages. More than 70% of the meaning of a message is conveyed by nonverbal behaviour. Awareness of nonverbal communication can improve the messages you send as well as help you to receive messages others send you. Developing good listening skills, and especially being aware of the barriers that prevent us from listening effectively, will enhance your ability to communicate and interpret messages.



8 Interpersonal communication in the workplace

Introduction



8.1 Introduction

The ability to work with others is basic to most careers. Despite our technological environment, interpersonal relationships are still important in business and the professions. Some argue that the more 'high tech' we introduce into our corporations, the more important our 'high touch' or interpersonal needs seem to become (Staley & Staley 1992:245). In this chapter we'll discuss different aspects of face-to-face communication between two people and in the next chapter we'll deal with communication in small groups. First, we'll discuss some of the factors that play a part in understanding our relationships and then end the chapter by discussing the interview situation. In the work environment you'll participate in interviews on many occasions, either as the interviewee or the interviewer.

As an accountant, you'll have to work with other people as part of an accounting firm or in a business. You'll also have to work with a variety of clients. In an organisation, all types of people find themselves thrown together and they have to work as a team towards goals the organisation sets. We come in all shapes and sizes and we bring to our workplaces our individual strengths and weaknesses. For example:

- Something may be very important to us but not to anyone else – and sometimes we can't understand why something is so important to others when we don't feel the same.
- Other people's behaviour may sometimes surprise or annoy us.
- We may feel insulted by the way someone else brushes over things that we value and about which we feel strongly.
- We may be very religious but a co-worker might make jokes about religion.

All of us have the natural tendency to feel more comfortable with people who are similar to us and try to avoid those with different appearances, values or ideas. Outside the work environment this may be fine, but in the workplace (or with different clients) very often you'll inevitably have to deal and share with people who are very different from you – in many ways.

However, you may be surprised by someone you originally perceived to be very different from you, if you start to know that person better.

Good interpersonal relationships and the communication associated with them are the ingredients for successful co-operation in the workplace. But communication problems can also be the cause of interpersonal conflict that can ruin the task that needs to be done.

Let's consider this hypothetical scenario:

Tina works in a department at a big accounting firm as a bookkeeping clerk. One of the firm's partners, Thabo, is her direct supervisor. He is an introvert, detail oriented, organised and highly task driven – the characteristics that made him a very efficient accountant producing good results. In contrast, Tina is much more of a caring person – and is generally regarded as the 'mother of the troop'. Tina perceives Thabo as aloof and distant – and as looking down

on the clerks in the department. Except for the annual lunch as a department, there is no real social contact between department members.

Tina approached Thabo to propose having tea together as a department once a week for 30 minutes. Thabo at first rejected the idea but gave in later after Tina insisted on the event – as well as his presence. At the first weekly tea, the staff formed into groups made of friends (so did management), but after a few weeks staff members started moving around. Tina and her fellow staff members discovered that Thabo was actually a very pleasant person when in an informal setting. That set the tone for the whole department to start knowing each other as people – on a different level than they did when they just focused on a task.

Activity 8.1

Ask yourself:

1. Do I form satisfactory relationships as a student?
2. What kinds of experiences have helped shape me into the person I am?

Teaching Note

Activity 8.1 aims to get you thinking about yourself in preparation for Section 8.2, which deals with self-image.



8.2 Self-image

Interpersonal relationships and communication are closely related to a person's self-image. This determines how we perceive others to see and respond to us – and how we respond to their actions.

Your self-image is the concept or picture that you have of yourself. People with a positive self-image generally work well with others and communicate with confidence. People with a negative self-image often perform below their actual ability. The outcome is that, when offered a promotion, for instance, they turn it down because they feel that they are not good enough.

- For the purposes of understanding yourself, it's useful to divide self-image into six dimensions:
1. The **physical** dimension describes the way you see your material body: how you evaluate your appearance.
 2. The **psychological** dimension describes your evaluation of your personality: whether you see yourself as, for example, emotional or rational, shy or outgoing, caring or selfish, a people's person or a loner.
 3. The **intellectual** dimension is concerned with problem-solving, reasoning, analysis and logical thinking: it determines how intelligent you think you are.
 4. The **skills** dimension describes your evaluation of your social and technical skills.
 5. The **moral** dimension describes your values, the principles you uphold, and your ethical beliefs: it determines the degree to which you accept accountability for your actions.

6. The **sexual** dimension describes how masculine or feminine you think you are: how you evaluate your popularity with members of the same and opposite gender (Van Staden, Marx & Erasmus-Kritzinger 2007).

Activity 8.2

Using the six dimensions we described above, draw a mental picture of how you see yourself. Consider each of the dimensions systematically and write it down.

Teaching Note

It is sometimes useful to sit back and take a good look at, and appreciate, yourself. Activity 8.2 invites you to consider: 'Who am I? How do I see myself? What makes me what I am?'



The more we value ourselves, the more likely we are to meet challenges that come our way and perform well in a variety of situations. Success tends to breed success. People who think well of themselves generally think well of others and are more successful in their private and professional lives. When we perceive ourselves as failures, we are more likely to behave in ways that cause us to fail and our relationships often suffer as a result.

Table 8.1 summarises some important differences between people who have positive perceptions of themselves and those who have negative perceptions (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor 2001:73).

Table 8.1 Characteristics of communicators with positive self-esteem and negative self-esteem

Persons with positive self-esteem	Persons with negative self-esteem
1. Are likely to think well of others	1. Are likely to disapprove of others
2. Expect to be accepted by others	2. Expect to be rejected by others
3. Evaluate their own performance more favourably	3. Evaluate their own performance less favourably
4. Perform well when being watched; are not afraid of others' reactions	4. Perform poorly when being watched; are sensitive to possible negative reactions
5. Work harder for people who demand high standards of performance	5. Work harder for undemanding, less critical people
6. Are inclined to feel comfortable with others they view as superior in some way	6. Feel threatened by people they view as superior in some way
7. Are able to defend themselves against negative comments of others	7. Have difficulty defending themselves against others' negative comments; are more easily influenced

Source: S. Steinberg. 2007. *An Introduction to Communication Studies*. Juta. Cape Town:145.

1. We cannot separate the parts of the self as was done above – we see ourselves as a whole and our communication reflects the whole self.
2. The self is not static, but dynamic. It grows and changes throughout our lives.

There are three main influences on the development of self-image:

1. **Intrapersonal communication (communication with ourselves).** The messages we give ourselves help us to form a view of whom and what we think we are. Intrapersonal messages are our responses to communication with other people.
2. **Interpersonal communication.** We build up a self-image as we work with other people and react to the messages we receive from them. If, for example, you constantly receive negative messages – especially nonverbal messages – then the way you see yourself will be undermined. In contrast, frequent positive messages reinforce your self-image.
3. **Past experiences.** The image you have at any particular time is the outcome of perceptions provided by your parents, teachers, friends, colleagues and others since birth.

But think about the influence of perception, which we discussed in Chapter 1, and you can understand why the image you have of yourself can be distorted. Your interpretation of other people's messages can result in inaccurate perceptions of yourself. Such inaccuracies often cause self-fulfilling prophecies.

2.1 Self-fulfilling prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies occur when what we believe about ourselves and others often comes true. Ask people who consistently perform well in job interviews and they'll tell you that they make the effort to keep their emotions under control, dress appropriately, and mentally rehearse the sort of questions they expect to face and the answers they'll give. As a result they are more confident in the interview than people who tell themselves that they're going to perform poorly, and usually do.

An evaluation experiment

An interesting experiment was conducted at an American university. One class of students was told that their new professor was warm, friendly and outgoing. The second class was told that he was cold, distant and withdrawn. When students filled in teacher evaluation forms, the first class generally rated the professor as warm, friendly and outgoing while the second class said that he was cold, distant and withdrawn.

Self-fulfilling prophecies influence our self-concept. For example:

A child who is constantly criticised at home may, as an adult, be aware only of negative messages and not 'hear' positive messages.

In contrast, children whose parents constantly tell them that they are clever and fearless may become entrepreneurs who aren't afraid to take risks in their business and are willing to try out new courses of action.

People with a positive self-image usually perceive others to be friendly and their attitude towards them is outgoing and pleasant. Their behaviour accounts, to a large extent, for the positive response they get from others. People with a negative self-image often feel rejected because they perceive others as unfriendly and, from the outset, they behave defensively. They don't understand that it is their very behaviour that causes others to reject them. Very few people can accurately perceive their strong and weak points, or their social and work assets and liabilities. Be aware of the positive and negative feedback that others send you verbally and nonverbally and adjust your behaviour if necessary.

A wonderful example of a self-fulfilling prophecy is provided by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (try to arrange to watch the film *My Fair Lady* on DVD):

In My Fair Lady (the filmed version of Shaw's play Pygmalion), Professor Henry Higgins transforms a cockney flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, into a fine lady by teaching her how to dress, behave and speak like an upper-class lady. Eliza herself indicates that she understands the principle of self-fulfilling prophecies when she says to Colonel Pickering: '... the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.'

Source: T.K. Gable & M.W. Gable, M.W. 1998. *Contexts: Communicating Interpersonally.* Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, MA:41

8.2.2 Cultural and gender differences

Culture creates perceptions of men's and women's roles in society and at work. The Western view of self is that individuals are responsible for the choices they make in life. Western children are generally taught the values of independence and develop high self-esteem from them, but in other cultures – mainly African and Eastern – children develop self-esteem when they perceive themselves to be co-operative and helpful because in these cultures the family and society are more important than the individual.

Activity 8.2

Answer the following questions:

1. How does your concept of yourself influence your communication with others? Briefly explain.
2. Which past relationships most affected the development of yourself? Which present relationships are having the most influence on the current development of yourself?

7. Usually an incident when a comment of yours influenced someone else's self-concept. Was your comment deliberate or unintentional? How were you able to determine the impact of your communication?
8. Identify a problem you have with your self-concept. Were you made to feel inadequate by a particular person? Are you living a self-fulfilling prophecy? What do you think you should do to change this behaviour?
9. Job applications often ask prospective candidates to describe themselves using 10 adjectives.
 - a. How would you describe yourself?
 - b. Think about five different people who know you fairly well. How do you think each one would describe you?

Teaching Note

All of us have experienced an incident or a comment from someone else that made an impact on us – and influenced our life. Activity 8.3 aims to help you consider this. A well-known rugby player has explained that a prominent person in rugby circles watched him play as a 13-year-old boy in a school game and told him he would become a Springbok player. This person's belief in his abilities gave him the confidence to realise the ideal.



2.3 Improving self-image
 Would you like to improve your self-image? Most of us would. Change is a gradual process and takes a great deal of self-discipline.

Tips for improving your self-image

- Pick one area in which you would like to improve yourself and see if you can work out why you've had problems in this area. Are you perhaps living out a self-fulfilling prophecy?
- Try to visualise how a more positive view of yourself would influence your relationships and your career. Visualisation can help you to change.
- Try to determine how other people's messages have influenced your self-concept. Do the people in your environment support what you try to achieve or do they try to hold you back? For instance, many husbands decide whether their wives continue in their profession after marriage. Such situations often lead to poor interpersonal relationships. Can you change such circumstances so that you are in control?
- Be aware of the positive and negative feedback that others send you. Some people who have been raised by overly critical parents, for example, find it difficult to accept the positive comments about themselves they receive from others. Others simply choose to ignore the negative feedback they receive.
- The context in which you are communicating is important. You may think that you have a great sense of humour. When you are being interviewed for a job, however, you're expected to answer certain questions carefully rather than tell jokes that would go down well at a party.

Your perceptions of other people can create stereotypes, as we discussed in Chapter 7. To reiterate: stereotyping means that, as we form impressions of other people, we tend to put them into groups based on categories such as their race, religion, occupation, age, gender, physical disabilities, accent or socioeconomic level. Thus, for example, we might think about 'a clerk', 'a foreigner', 'a lawyer', 'a trouble-maker' or 'the elderly', and expect people to have the characteristics we associate with that type, rather than communicating with each person as an individual (Steinberg 2007).

Activity 8.4

Answer the following questions:

1. Do you ever question the accuracy of your perceptions?
2. Do you ever withhold judgement based on first impressions until you are able to find out more about a person?
3. Do you take the trouble to talk to people to confirm or change your first impressions of them?
4. Are you aware that people may change over time and that you need to adjust your perceptions accordingly?
5. Do you check your perceptions of people's nonverbal behaviour by asking questions? For instance, you might think that a colleague is annoyed with you, but in conversation discover that she is upset about something totally unrelated.
6. Do you try to understand other people's points of view and see the world from their perspective?

Teaching Note

The purpose of Activity 8.4 is to sensitise you to the fact that you could be wrong about other people. Are the differences you experience substantial or simply because of your prejudice or bias? If you take the trouble to investigate your judgement about people, what they do and what they say, you'll realise that in many instances you've probably been wrong about them.



8.3 Interpersonal competence skills

Several skills contribute to effective interpersonal relationships in the workplace. We discussed two such skills in Chapter 7 – understanding nonverbal communication and the ability to listen actively. Other important skills are self-disclosure, assertiveness and empathy. Let's discuss these.

8.3.1 Self-disclosure

The term 'self-disclosure' describes our willingness to share ideas, opinions, feelings, and beliefs with others. Self-disclosure depends a great deal on trust. We are more likely to talk openly to people we have learnt to trust. Also:

- People with a positive self-image are more likely than those with a negative self-image to disclose information about themselves.

People of status don't usually reveal information about themselves to people of lesser status. Generally, men are less inclined to make self-disclosures than women.

In your career, the culture of the organisation in which you work will prescribe the norms for appropriate self-disclosure. Some managers prefer employees to leave their problems at home, while others maintain that sharing one's personal problems strengthens the bonds between workers and increases employee commitment.

There is also some risk involved in self-disclosure. Revealing too much information about yourself may be inappropriate. For example, admitting that you lost a job because you were accused of using petty cash for personal purchases may cause people in your new work environment to reject you. Generally, it is considered appropriate to be gradual in sharing information and to take careful note of the other person's responses, especially their nonverbal feedback. If you become aware that the other person does not want to share their feelings with you and does not want to hear information about you, stop immediately.

Researchers have used their understanding of the relationship between self-disclosure and feedback to identify four interpersonal communication styles used in organisations:

Open communicators. Open communicators are typically trusting and friendly. They balance disclosure and feedback in their communication. An open communicator generally lets you know how a project is going and will ask for your opinion on it. They invite constructive criticism and are willing to discuss an issue and to find a satisfactory conclusion to conflict. The best way to interact with open communicators, especially if your manager is such a person, is to be an open communicator yourself.

Blind communicators. Blind communicators are typically overconfident and tend to throw their weight around. They do not readily listen to feedback and tend to ignore the negative responses of others. They have a need to control situations and dislike being told what to do. They often overestimate their abilities and communication skills and are critical, demanding and competitive. As managers they are difficult to work for because they rarely offer compliments for work well done or allow you to take the initiative. When interacting with a blind communicator, it is important to do your best, handle criticism gracefully and appeal to their expertise.

Hidden communicators. Hidden communicators are so called because they hide their feelings and thoughts. Typically, they mistrust others and so disclose little about themselves, but they seek constant feedback about what is happening in the organisation and how others perceive them. They are often well spoken and polite, but under the surface is someone who is manipulative, suspicious, and two-faced. Working for a hidden communicator is difficult as you will never know where you stand and your motives will always be under suspicion. Because hidden communicators disclose very little, you have to be especially alert to their nonverbal behaviour. Interacting with such a person requires tact, insight and caution.

Closed communicators. Closed communicators are typically noncommunicators. Their problem is usually poor self-image. Because they are insecure, they disclose little about themselves and rarely request feedback. They generally prefer to work alone and can be extremely productive. But they are not easy to work for because they will keep you at a distance. If you work for a closed manager, you may have to find the answers to questions from

other senior-level managers and should not expect support if you run into trouble. Interact carefully with all communicators who use a closed style because the slightest criticism will set them off – cause them to lose their temper; for instance (Staley & Staley 1992).

Activity 8.5

1. Identify the difference in your openness in two of your relationships: one with a colleague and one with a manager.
2. Think about your communication style. What sort of communicator are you? Remember that all four communication styles have positive and negative points.

Teaching Note

It may be beneficial for you to critically look at your communication style – to identify weaknesses and your strong points. Activity 8.5 will help you do this. The idea is for you to capitalise on your strong points and to be aware of your weak points in order to improve your communication skills.



8.3.2 Assertiveness

The term 'assertiveness' refers to the way in which people express themselves. Assertiveness usually depends on self-esteem. There are three styles of assertive behaviour:

1. **The passive or nonassertive style.** People who behave passively are generally reluctant to state opinions, share feelings, or assume responsibility for their actions because they want to avoid conflict at all costs, even when they are being treated unfairly. You may have noticed that people who respond in a nonassertive style often hesitate, avoid eye contact, accept blame needlessly, and generally lack confidence. People who constantly fail to assert themselves encourage others to manipulate them as they are perceived as weak and incompetent. Cultural differences also play a part. In some societies, nonassertive behaviour is perceived to be an asset for women but a liability for men. Thus, some women in business behave passively because they accept the stereotype that society has taught them: they are expected to be accepting and deferential to men.
2. **The aggressive style.** Aggressive people use every opportunity to put down others with little concern for the feelings of those concerned. They insist on standing up for their rights while ignoring the rights of others. Their only concern is to 'win' in any situation. People who constantly display aggressive behaviour in interpersonal social or work situations may initially get their own way, but they are generally disliked and their behaviour has a negative result on their relationships. They are self-opinionated, speak loudly, and interrupt others. They often initiate conflict, rather than resolve it. They display behaviour such as sulking, banging doors or drawers shut, or making other people feel guilty.
3. **The assertive style.** The goal of assertive behaviour is neither to avoid conflict nor to dominate a relationship, but to communicate feelings and opinions honestly and clearly. Assertive people are generally respected and seen as competent, strong, fair, and confident (see Steinberg 2007).

Characteristics of assertive people

People who behave assertively display the following characteristics:

- They take responsibility for their actions and feelings, without personal attacks on others.
- They use a firm but pleasant tone to express their feelings, to state what they believe to be true, to make suggestions, and to give reasons for their opinions and feelings.
- Their verbal and nonverbal messages are congruent. Tone of voice, eye contact, and posture match the words they speak.
- They face contentious issues, protect the rights of others, allow room for negotiation or compromise, and generally convey confidence.

To be successful in your career, it is important to understand that we all have the same right to protect ourselves, to express our needs in a relationship, and to influence the way others behave towards us. Assertive behaviour implies that we have to find *mutually satisfactory solutions* to the problems and conflicts that arise in our relationships (Gamble & Gamble 1998; Verderber & Verderber 1990).

3.3 Developing assertive behaviour

Aiming yourself to become assertive is not easy. According to Briggs, 'assertion training about improving personal, and thereby professional, effectiveness. It is concerned with a building of self-confidence and esteem, and the ability to translate this into improving communications and relationships' (1986:24).

Tips for developing assertive behaviour

- Understanding the nature of assertiveness, the different types of response, and the reasons for not asserting ourselves will help us to understand our particular problems in this regard.
- Self-knowledge is also required. Remember the discussion of perception in Chapter 1? People may be unassertive because they perceive others incorrectly, for example perceiving a tyrant as being a 'strong leader'.
- Consider your nonverbal behaviour (e.g. eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and posture) in assertive situations. It is very difficult to assert yourself in a contentious situation, for instance, if you constantly mumble your responses and slouch in your chair.



it several past situations in which you were nonassertive or aggressive. Try to determine the reasons for the behaviour and then substitute an assertive response for the nonassertive or aggressive behaviour in each case.

Teaching Note

People communicate and respond intuitively. All of us can recall situations in which retrospectively we thought that we should have done something differently. Activity 8.6 aims to help you to analyse your own behaviour and enable you to identify your own shortcomings. Regular 'checks' on your communication behaviour will enable you to respond appropriately in situations instead of realising afterwards how you should have responded.



To conclude this section on developing assertiveness, let's consider 'Every Person's Bill of Rights' (Gamble and Gamble 1987:192). This bill of rights offers guidelines on how to stand up for your emotional rights without being insensitive to the rights and feelings of others.

Every Person's Bill of Rights

1. The right to be treated with respect
 2. The right to make your own choices and decisions
 3. The right to make mistakes and/or change your mind
 4. The right to have needs and to have these needs considered as important as the needs of others
 5. The right to express your feelings and opinions
 6. The right to judge your own behaviour
 7. The right to set your own priorities
 8. The right to say no without feeling guilty
 9. The right not to make choices for others
 10. The right to assert yourself
- Source: T.K. Gamble & M.W. Gamble 1987. *Communication Works* (2nd ed.). Random House. New York:192.



Study the scenario below and then answer the questions:

Sienna, Lerato and Ilana are first-year Accounting students who live in the same residence at their university. They are excited at the prospect of the end-of-year dance this evening. When the three students who are to be their escorts arrive, one of them, Peter, produces a joint, takes a drag and passes the joint to Lerato. They all know that drugs are prohibited in the residence rooms, but Lerato doesn't want to create an unpleasant incident before the dance so she takes a small puff and passes the joint on.

Sienna grabs it and says, 'Peter, you are a bloody idiot. You know damn well that drugs are not allowed in these rooms. Why can't you guys have a good time without getting stoned? Now get out of here.'

Ilana says, 'Peter, perhaps you didn't know that drugs aren't allowed in the residence. Please lock your stash into the boot of the car. We can all have a good time without getting into trouble or risking an accident.'

Which of the three responses can be described as:

- a. assertive
 - b. passive
 - c. aggressive?
- Is the passive response in the interests of the group? What is the possible outcome?
 - Is the aggressive response in the interests of the group? What is the possible outcome?
 - Is the assertive response in the interests of the group? What is the possible outcome?
- Comment briefly on the following:
- a. the feelings you think are being expressed in the three responses
 - b. the choice of language
 - c. the non-verbal behaviour that probably accompanied the verbal message.

Teaching Note

The purpose of Activity 8.7 is to allow you to analyse objectively a situation and understand the dynamics at play. The idea is that you should then apply those skills and understanding in your communication encounters and try to get similar distance and perspective in your own encounters.



3.4 Empathy

Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy is the sharing of feelings from the other person's point of view, not the expression of your own feelings. Empathy requires qualities such as active listening, perceptual skills and awareness of emotions. In your career, you may have to listen tactfully in a variety of situations, ranging from a colleague's problems to a customer's criticisms or your manager's concerns about overdue financial statements. When showing empathy it is important:

- to use supportive body language;
- to use a warm tone of voice;
- not to allocate blame;
- not to give unwanted advice.

Empathy doesn't mean agreement. Empathy confirms our concern for other people's thoughts and feelings. Telling someone not to be upset about a situation is not showing empathy. We communicate empathy when we say, 'I can understand why you feel angry', or 'I don't blame you for worrying about losing your job.'

Activity 8.8

1. Explain the difference between empathy and sympathy with the aid of examples.
2. How would you show empathy to a colleague who says, 'I'm so upset about Peter not giving me an increase after all the overtime I've put in this year.'

Teaching Note

In Chapter 1 we emphasised the need to put yourself in the shoes of other people to really understand their needs and issues. Activity 8.8 aims to help you appreciate that empathy is real understanding of another person's situation and feelings. One of the ideals of communication is to reach a state of intersubjectivity – exact (or as close as possible) sharing of understanding in a given situation.



8.4 The interview situation

In the business communication context, an interview does not mean simply an interview for a prospective job. A business interview has been concisely described as '... an intentional face-to-face communication process between an interviewer (usually a manager) and a respondent (usually an employee), which concentrates on specific contents and is designed to meet preconceived objectives' (Gibson & Hodgetts 1986:328). Please take note of the words 'intentional' and 'preconceived'. 'Intentional' implies that there is a specific reason for the communication encounter. 'Preconceived' suggests that both participants have put some thought and preparation into their meeting.

Knowledge of interviewing will be important to you in your work life, whether you're a clerk or a manager. As a clerk, you'll be most likely to experience interviews as an interviewee; as a manager or supervisor you'll probably conduct interviews yourself. The way in which you perform in an interview can play a determining role in the success of your career.

8.4.1 Types of interview

In the business context, several types of interview are conducted (see Rensburg & Bredenkamp 1991), for example:

- The employment interview. The objective is to discuss the suitability of the applicant for a prospective post in the organisation, for example that of bookkeeper.
- The counselling interview. This is used to discuss problems that an employee may be experiencing in the workplace, for example that the workload is unfair.
- The performance appraisal interview. This is used to discuss the work performance and productivity of an employee – this could be extremely good, poor, or mediocre. In this type of interview, new or revised objectives for the future may be discussed. It is often the basis on which a pay increase is determined.
- The disciplinary interview. This is used to discuss complaints lodged against an employee, for instance that he or she is always late for work. It is also used when an employee breaks

- a company rule. It can be very uncomfortable for the interviewee. However, this type of interview is also used for employees' protection: many organisational rules relate directly to employee safety, for instance rules about use of drugs and alcohol in a factory that uses heavy machinery.
- The exit interview. This provides the opportunity for an employer to find out why an employee has resigned from an organisation. The employer may approach the interview with a great deal of suspicion, so it is vital for the interviewer to put the employee at ease. Employees should contribute both positive and negative information that might make the job more rewarding for future employees.
- The orientation interview. This is used to provide new employees with background information about the organisation and information about duties.
- The research interview. This is used to obtain information, usually from an expert in the field, about a particular topic. For example, a student studying tax law might ask the tax partner in an accounting practice if he can interview her on the topic.

8.4.2 Typical structure of a business interview

Although the content may differ, generally the business interview has a typical three-part structure. Let's discuss this:

1. **Introduction.** This is the opening phase of the business interview and is used to establish rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Both participants require a comfortable communication climate for the discussion. Generally, it is up to interviewers to create a comfortable physical and psychological climate and to put interviewees at ease by showing that they share their concerns. Verbal and nonverbal communication should be congruent – a handshake or a smile should accompany the initial greeting. When you attend an interview, make sure that you maintain eye contact throughout the interview and that you listen actively (we discussed this in Section 7.3). The interviewer should also make sure that the objective of the meeting is clear.
2. **Body.** This is the core of the discussion and deals with questions and answers. The various types of question that can be used in an interview include the following:

- **Open-ended questions** allow for unrestricted answers and are particularly useful if you want to encourage respondents to express their attitudes or opinions in their own words. They also provide for more detailed and personal responses, for example, 'How do you think employees in this organisation should receive information in order to do their jobs efficiently?' or 'Why did you major in tax law?'
- **Closed questions** offer several alternatives from which to choose and usually provide clear answers. The respondent cannot elaborate on these questions or give an explanation because specific answers are expected, for example, 'Is there time to implement the new payroll system before the end of the month?' or 'What starting salary do you anticipate?'

- An extreme form of closed question allows the respondent to respond with only a 'Yes' or 'No', for example, 'Do you smoke?'
- **Probing questions** are used to obtain more specific or more detailed information from the respondent. They are also often a useful follow-up for open-ended questions, for example, 'You feel that our advertising campaign is outdated – why?'
- **Leading questions** literally guide the respondent to a response. This is a manipulative technique that can result in the respondent saying things that are not really correct. An example of this technique is, 'So you are saying that you don't think Mr Shezi fits in with this organisation?'

It is important for the interviewer to give the interviewee the opportunity to raise any issues not covered in the body of the interview, and to remember to remain ethical throughout the interview. It is unethical, for instance, to ask a woman how marriage and children are going to affect her career.

3. **Conclusion.** Once the interviewer is satisfied that the topic has been fully covered, the interview must be closed. The close usually takes the form of a brief summary of what has been discussed or achieved. An effective close gives both participants the opportunity to ask final questions and eliminate any uncertainties. They should also decide on the next step to be taken. For example, in an employment interview the interviewer should tell applicants who will contact them and when. Generally, when the interview is over, the interviewer thanks the person for his or her time and insights and offers a handshake.

ACTIVITY 8.2

1. Would a question about your personal life in an employment interview affect your attitude towards the organisation? If so, how?
2. Imagine you're an interviewer. Choose a topic for an interview and plan how you would conduct the interview:
 - Your first decision is what kind of interview it is going to be: employment interview, counselling interview, performance appraisal interview, disciplinary interview, exit interview, orientation interview or research interview.
 - Make sure that you include open-ended and closed questions as well as at least one probing question and one leading question in your preparation.
 - Check that every question in your preparation is ethical.
3. Now plan how you would prepare for the same interview if you were the interviewee.

Teaching Note

Almost everyone who's been interviewed will tell you (or themselves) afterwards that they should have responded differently or should have said something more about this or that. In the heat of the moment it is not always possible to express yourself exactly as you'd have liked to when you thinking about it later. However, you can avoid this by preparing well and anticipating all possible scenarios. Activity 8.9 aims to help you do this. Preparation by all parties is the key to successful interviews.



Let's conclude this discussion with some ideas on how to present yourself in an interview situation.

Tips for interviews

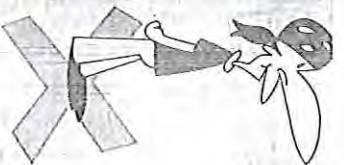
- Know what you would like the outcome of the interaction to be and plan your 'performance' to achieve the outcome.
- You aim to put across a desired image of yourself, so make sure that your appearance (clothing, makeup, grooming and so on) and communication behaviour are appropriate.
- Rehearse your performance in private before the interview.
- Use the relevant verbal and nonverbal skills and active listening, as well as appropriate feedback, assertiveness and self-disclosure.
- Self-knowledge and an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses will go a long way towards helping you project a desired image of yourself.
- Remember that you have several selves, and that it is necessary to present the self appropriate in a given situation. Presenting a social role when you start a new job, for example, simply won't work (see Burton & Dimbleby 1995).

8.5 Summary

Interpersonal communication and the ability to work with others is a key element in the development of your career. An accountant can't be concerned only with numbers, but will also have to work with other people and clients and need to pay deliberate attention to interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is related to self-image, which will influence the way you deal with other people. Your self-image can be the source of self-fulfilling prophecies – good or bad. Cultural and gender differences also have an influence on your self-image. Interpersonal skills, in turn, relate to the concept of self-disclosure – whether you are an open, a blind, a hidden or a closed communicator. You also need to consider your style of assertiveness and develop appropriate assertive behaviour whilst being empathetic. The interview situation varies in terms of type but follows a typical structure. There are useful tips to follow for successful interviews.

9 Communication in groups and teams

Introduction



Group functioning - The basics

Small groups

Leadership in groups

Follow-up and minutes

Conducting the meeting

Planning the meeting

Meetings

Problem-solving and decision-making

Identify and define the problem

Analyse and research the problem

What the solution should accomplish

Group conflict

Evaluate the team's performance

Implement the solution

Find and evaluate solutions

Conflict resolution

Summary

