



CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND MANAGEMENT

Non-Verbal Communication (NVC)

Topic 1 (of 4)

Universal Level: All human beings depend on NVC to survive

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Lecture transcript

Opening slide

Slide 1

In this week, we will delve into a very specific topic called non-verbal communication (NVC). Remember when we are abroad and don't know the language? We use body expressions to order food and ask for direction. That's an example of non-verbal communication.

This week, we will first understand why non-verbal communication is so important, why all human beings depend on NVC to survive. While we all depend on NVC, there are 2 main levels of dependence: high and low context. Topic 3 will explain three main kinds of NVC: time, space, and body language. Topic 4 will provide us some non-verbal strategies to achieve the optimal balance between being a product and a producer of cultures.

Slide 3

Let's have a recap of what we have learned after the Introduction lecture. For animals, their genes mostly tell them how to survive. For humans, culture is our life guidance. We learn how to survive by adapting to and creating a culture. That's basically why we are having this course, so you can adapt to, and create a culture effectively as someone working in an international context. Without this ability, you will be disadvantaged compared to someone who is more cultural competent.

So culture is faster, richer, and more dynamic than genes, because it can both influence and be influenced by environment, gene, brain and behavior. This two-way interplay happens at all three levels: universal level where we are all the same, collective level where we have different national, organizational or group culture, and at the individual level where each of us is a unique and dynamic person. Because of this dynamics, in order to understand a culture, we need to look at the specific context, and go beyond cultural stereotypes

The tree of culture has three layers. The trunk represents fundamental concerns, which are the building blocks that make a human culture possible. For example: religion, language, music, hierarchy, loyalty, and respect... While some animals may have a simple version of those, for humans, they are extremely sophisticated.

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While fundamental concern is important at the baseline level, value, or the branches of the tree, means asking: "How important is this concern?" It is the degree of importance each community or individual places on this concern. For example, hierarchy, as a fundamental concern, is important in all companies. But above the baseline level, the value is high, and very important in my company, while the value could be moderate in your company.

Then we have the canopy, which are the specific objects, symbols and behaviors of those fundamental concerns and values. For example, hierarchy in my company is calling the manager "sir" or "madam", but in your company, you can use this person's first name. Many of these outward expressions use no language, or very little language. That's why we call them non-verbal communication. This lesson is explicitly about this part of the tree canopy.

Slide 4

Topic 1 of this lesson is about the way all human beings rely on NVC to survive. But why is that? Let's start at the universal level here. The first reason has to do with emotion. So let's have a quick answer to these questions: How much do you remember from the most interesting course at high school? How much do you remember from the best book you have read? How much do you remember from the most productive meeting with your colleague?

The chance is big that you may remember some, but not so much. You just have the feeling that it is the most interesting course, the best book and the most productive meeting.

What happens here is that for each of these experiences, your brain creates an emotion tag, like we put a little writing on a bottle. Next time when we have to decide what to do, we look at the tag, i.e. the emotion, without having to look inside the bottle for details. We can decide quickly by using the tags and don't have to remember everything of the content. If the same teacher is giving the course, we will follow it. If the same author writes another book, we will buy it. If the same colleague is around, we want that person in the team.

So emotion is the memory tag in the brain. It helps us decide quickly in the future. Emotion is a major force behind basically every decision that we make. This is where NVC comes in. It is important because it is a primary source for emotion. So why does this happen?

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First of all, NVC provides a source of emotion by acting as our most basic form of communication. It is the first method of communication before language even exists. Let's have a quick look at these tribes in the Amazon who proactively made the first contact with the outside world. Without a common language, they communicated with body movement, using tools and space to share their message. Listen to your body, what emotions arose when you watched their approach? You may forget what these people exactly did, but these emotions will guide you to make a decision in the future.

Slide 6

Here is another example of Oxana Malaya, a young woman who was neglected by her parents and so she lived among the dogs and adopted the dogs' way of life. As humans can learn any culture with NVC, she survived by using the universal language of humans and animals: Non-verbal behaviors.

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Because NVC has been here long before spoken language, it has more impact. Imagine you need to communicate this message to your colleague: "Please submit the document on Monday". You can email, make a call, or meet her/him in person. The impact of word is very minimal 7%, the tone of your voice makes the message much more significant 38%, and obviously, the best way to create an impact with your message is a F2F meeting because body language makes all the difference. Why? Because it creates more emotion tags, making it easier for your colleague to make a decision of doing what you asked for. The bottom line is, NVC has many times more impact than verbal communication.

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The second reason why NVC is important is because we use non-verbal signals to judge, to recognize ingroup and outgroup. For our ancestors who lived in small communities, ingroup could be people with similarities in NVC, who they can trust. Outgroup could be those with differences in NVC, which could be signals of potential threats.

Because in the past, knowing quickly who are friends and enemies is a matter of life or death, the brain has evolved to decide who is ingroup and outgroup extremely quickly, based on NVC. The brain when seeing ingroup people activates quite differently from seeing outgroup. This discrimination process is automatic, built-in for survival.

Until this day, even though we don't live on the savanna anymore, the brain still works the same old savanna way. When you meet a person, within the first few seconds, the brain has to answer these 4 questions: Do I like you? Can I trust you? Am I safe with you? Who do you remind me of? This decision is based on non-verbal signals such as skin color, gender, language or even clothes. It takes only one tenth of a second for the brain to make trust decision.

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Because some non-verbal signals can be so important for survival, the brain can sometimes recognize these visual signals even when we are blind. In this experiment, the person has cortical blindness, so he could not see, however his amygdala activated when he is shown a picture with eyes looking directly at him, much more so than when the eyes are looking away. We may not consciously see it, but the brain does. How to explain and gain the ability to listen to those signals from the brain, has been the focus of many studies in meditation, intuition or even gut feeling.

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Here is another incredible study to show us how NVC is used to judge others. A group of student watched and evaluated very short video clips of 30 seconds from teachers they don't know, without sound, only NVC. The other group evaluated their own teachers after the whole semester sitting in their class and listening to their lectures. Guess what, their evaluation is very similar. This means students tend to judge the quality of teaching mainly on NVC. And it takes only 30 seconds to do so.

I would like to add a side note here about the author of this classic study. Professor Nalini Ambady is a leading psychologist in the US. She is known world-wide for studies in stereotypes and NVC. She passed away recently due to a lack of bone marrow donation for South Asian patients, which raised a serious question of racial disproportion in the donor bank. It is a terrible loss for all of us.

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To bring this closer to home, NVC is what you may want to think about when coming to an interview or important meeting. It's worrying that bright colors are a turn-off, 65% of bosses said something as trivial as clothes can decide whether they would hire people. And while the average length of an interview is app. 40 minutes, 33% of the bosses claimed that they know within the first 90 seconds of an interview whether they will hire someone or not. Please pause and take a good look at more statistics to see the impact of NVC.

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Outside the office, NVC is used to pass evaluation on almost everything, including a comeback of an ancient matching technique when arranged marriage was still popular. If you want to take advantage of this service, you will be sent a few 3 day old t-shirts to sniff around. Listen to your emotions, what does this smell remind you of? Feel good or familiar? It probably matches really good experience in the past of your life. And you probably have just found your half. The interesting thing is that gay men tend to prefer the scent of gay men, and straight women tend to prefer the scent of straight men as well.

Slide 14

One more reason for NVC to be trusted is that many of them are automatic. Here is one example: you touch the cactus: OUCH. Before the brain knows it is painful, your hand is already lifted. This reflex happens without thinking. If we had to think about it, it would probably be too late.

Micro-expressions are tiny little movements, such as the twitching of muscles that lasts only a fraction of a second. They are similar to reflexes, both are automatic. We don't know we are doing it. Some studies say they could reveal lies or some of the truth. Detecting micro-expression is hard, because they are so brief, but we can look at other more obvious non-verbal cues to guess the issues behind them. For example, rolling eyes could mean dislike or disagreement. Touching nose could mean an effort to release tension.

In this picture, Bill Clinton was saying "I did NOT have sexual relations with that woman". The thing is, he was pointing to one way, but he was looking the other way. It didn't match. Some body language experts argued that this non-verbal cue revealed his little lie. So the take-home is, because much of NVC is automatic, they could be used to give judgement.

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Finally, NVC is a source of emotion by acting as a means for us to create our identities. This is already quite obvious, and I would like to bring back here the two young brilliant women I met in Dubai. I airbrushed their faces for their privacy. For their start-up, they wanted to create a strong business identity as ambitious Emirati women. They consciously used culture as a business strategy, by taking their religion as an inspiration. They took their culture and religion as an inspiration, and adopted a new identity by changing their way of life. They put on a hijab, followed more religious practices. And at the same time, they kept the essence of their personality, by being a counter-stereotype of Muslim women, by being ambitious, progressive, and very outspoken.

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To conclude, NVC is a main source of emotion (so to make emotion tags). And emotion is important because it helps to make decision in life. There are 3 ways that NVC can create emotion tags for us.

Number 1 is that NVC acts as a primary form of communication NVC has been the common connection among humans, between humans and animals. It has many times more impact than verbal communication

The second way NVC provides emotion tags is by acting as a means to judge others. We judge others quickly, automatically based on non-verbal signals such as clothes, skin color, and gender. People tend to believe NVC than actual words.

The third way that NVC provides emotion tags is by acting as a means to create identities. We design who we are by NVC, by how we dress, what we own, how we talk, or what we do.