

The Nonverbal Skills You Need for Successful Negotiation

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Great books have taught us how to plan and execute a successful negotiation. Interestingly, applying the theory of negotiation is incredibly easy for some, and terribly hard for others. A reason for this, is that some people naturally persuade others by the way they move, look and express their ideas. Fortunately for many of us, it's possible to learn very simple gestures that with practice, will effectively empower our words and give us an advantage at the negotiating table.

Apart from gestures that will make our words resonate and put us in a favorable position within a negotiation, there are also a series of reactions that we can observe in our counterparts to determine how comfortable they are with the options we are presenting to them. Ideally, by using this nonverbal awareness within our negotiations, we can assess the relative strength of our counterpart's BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement), the scope of the deal's ZOPA (Zone of Potential Agreement) and their preferences with regards to the different options.

When we think of nonverbal communication, we tend to think of facial gestures. Thanks to a book called *What Every BODY Is Saying* by Joe Navarro, the approach that we will take in this text focuses on reactions on different sections of the body, like the feet, torso, arms and hands. The logic behind it is that since our infancy, we are taught to mask our facial emotions. Just think of a child that doesn't like the food he has in front of him. Visualize his face and then imagine what his father will most likely suggest. Society depends on our ability to remain courteous despite our conflicting and very different interests. For that reason, when we look for honest reactions at the other side of the table, its best we focus on every other part of the body. Yet we will cover very specific reactions that are present in the face but that cannot usually be consciously controlled.

To properly understand the natural honesty derived from certain nonverbal communication, it's important to realize that there is a section in our brain, called the "limbic brain", which reacts instantly and without thought, towards certain external stimuli (Navarro, 2008, 22). Being in charge of our reflexes, it has played a very important role in the evolution and survival of our species. All of the gestures we will focus on, are controlled directly by the limbic system, and are usually displayed without restraint. Therefore, they may serve a dual purpose. First, we will have an idea of what the others are thinking. Second, we will be aware of our own behavior and have the ability to modify it. By doing so, we will have control over the situation and project security, build rapport, or encourage teamwork whenever needed.

Behaviors to look for when discussing interests and presenting options:

Pacifying Behaviors.

Every time that our limbic brain reacts towards a stimulus that it finds threatening or discomforting, like an option that is deemed inappropriate, a series of pacifying behaviors become apparent (Navarro, 2008, 35). Look for the following behaviors whenever you or they mention their target price or interest, whenever you ask them a specific question about how they came up with a specific proposal, or whenever they hint that they may walk away from the table due to what they describe as a better BATNA. When you notice they are pacifying, try to understand their situation and reframe the problem so that negotiations may continue.

One of the most natural and common pacifiers whenever a person is experiencing insecurity or concern over an issue, is to cover or touch the suprasternal notch. This is the space between the thorax and the Adam's apple, also known as neck dimple. The next time you see this display, think about what the person is discussing or pondering and you will realize that it tends to be something negative that affects the person greatly. On certain occasions, this behavior is displayed more discretely when a woman plays with a necklace or a man constantly adjusts his tie. Being a particularly sensitive and fragile part of our body, having contact with the hand augments the sense of security and tends to soothe whichever discomforting feelings we may be experiencing (Navarro, 2008, 36).

There are other behaviors that have very similar reasons to surface and generate similar pacifying effects. Whenever there is doubt or insecurity in what is being said, the person may place a hand on the neck. When nervous, the person may touch his face or cheeks. Usually after a mishap has occurred, or when pressure has cooled off, a person may also exhale with puffed out cheeks (Navarro, 2008, 40 - 41). All of these behaviors will soothe us and help us remain calm whilst we deal with something that discomforts us.

A very important pacification behavior that is often unnoticed is "the leg cleanser". The reason why it tends to go unnoticed is because it usually happens under the table. In this case, the person slides his hands from one end of his thigh to the other. The nerve endings in the thighs and hands are both stimulated by the friction and tend to release tension. During police work, this behavior is given special attention because it almost always appears whenever a suspect is confronted with damning evidence (Navarro, 2008, 47).

With all of these pacifying behaviors, it's important to always compare them with the general attitude of the individual. If a person is constantly touching his or her face, that particular behavior will not necessarily reveal helpful information. Your keen observation of his or her base behavior during neutral interaction, will be the key to successfully decoding the pacifying behaviors, however subtle, during further stages.

Important Specific Reactions

During a formal negotiation, you will frequently find yourself making suggestions and asking questions to gauge the interests of the other parties. The normal situation is to expect an honest answer and build up from there. What happens when the other parties refuse to play by the rules and lead you to believe that your offers or suggestions aren't

good enough and therefore are undeserving of adequate pay? With the following specific reactions, you will have a good opportunity to determine if they are holding back genuine interest.

Within our face, there is one thing that we cannot control at will and that gives us very valuable information when negotiating. We have no thoughtful control over our pupils; therefore eye dilation is a very precise way to determine interest (Navarro, 2008, 172). Naturally, when our brain perceives something pleasant, it will dilate or open the pupils, in order to obtain the greatest amount of information to process. When it perceives danger or discomfort, it will constrict the pupils so that we may focus in on the danger and avoid it (Hess, 1975, 110 – 119). This behavior not only limits itself to external stimuli, it reacts in the same way with thoughts. With this information in mind, make an effort to remember this the next time you are about to make an offer. Focus in on the other parties eyes whilst you mention an offer and you will know their real impression without having to wait for a facial expression or their words.

Another great way to read the other persons reaction to your offers, is to notice whenever they move less than usual during a statement. If the person usually accompanies their words with movement of the hands or body, and suddenly remains still whilst answering a question, take note of it. According to certain research, people who are masking true thoughts tend to gesture less and move their legs and arms less than people who say the truth (Vrij, 2003, 65). This occurs because the limbic system wants us to attract the least amount of attention when confronted with a possible danger. The danger in this case, is the risk of being caught deceiving (Navarro, 2008, 157). So be on the lookout for sudden restriction of the limbs whenever a person is expressing disinterest in your offers.

A very easy to spot gesture is the lip purse. This refers to a gesture that looks like a kiss, it occurs when we pucker our lips while being serious. This gesture is present whenever a person that is listening to you is considering a different idea and is not necessarily in agreement with you. According to Joe Navarro, this behavior is often seen at court trials. During the closing remarks of one attorney, the opposing parties will purse their lips in disagreement (Navarro, 2008, 191). During a negotiation, if you happen to be revising a draft of an agreement or a contract, by spotting lip pursing behavior, you may determine which parts to revise and discuss further.

Finally, two very evident gestures that will quickly tell you things are not going as planned and need reframing, are eye blocking and repeated kicking movements of the legs. As soon as something displeasing or negative is heard, our natural reaction is to try to distance ourselves from it. To do so, our limbic brain will instinctively instruct our eyes to close, or our hands to block our view for a moment (Navarro, 2008, 178). The other behavior is automatic and people usually don't recognize they are doing it. It is called the leg-kick response, and it is a subconscious indication of the intent of combating something that is deemed unpleasant. Both of these responses can be used to your advantage by asking specific questions that would require a yes or no answer, and that the other party might be unwilling to reveal.

The Nonverbal Skills That Will Help You Project Security & Build Rapport:

The following skills will help you generate a positive atmosphere and will give others the impression that you are focused and confident of your proposals. They are especially helpful when dealing with difficult situations and when your own negotiation position is not very strong. Some of them can be applied during our turn to speak, others can be applied while we listen.

While Listening:

One of the most powerful ways to demonstrate you are actively contemplating what the other person is saying, is to lean towards them in a subtle way. Try speaking with someone who is leaning away from you and facing an exit, and you will quickly wish to end the conversation (Navarro, 2008, 91). Instead, when you feel that your listener is facing and leaning towards you, you will be encouraged to share information and have a tendency to see the person in a positive light. Knowing this, it seems particularly important to apply in negotiation settings, where every bit of information is valuable.

As you lean towards the person, the positioning and gesture of your hands is of particular importance. Always avoid hiding your hands under the table or inside your pockets. From a psychological point of view, hidden hands generate suspicion and make others uncomfortable in your presence (Navarro, 2008, 134). Instead of hiding your hands or leaving them face down on the table, you may use “steeppling”, which is a powerful hand gesture that denotes high confidence. It is achieved by joining the hands at the fingertips and makes the hands form the shape of an arrow head. Practice a subtle approach to steeppling and you will project security whilst remaining refined.

While Speaking:

Compared with other parts of our bodies, the hands tend to capture most of our brain's attention (Givens, 2005, 31). Anthropologically, our survival has depended on assessing the hands of others because of the threat they can sometimes pose. In the context of day to day interaction and particularly negotiation, effective use of hand gestures to accompany our words, is one of the most important skills to learn. If you could single out a similar trait in all of the great orators and speakers of history, powerful hand gestures would be the one (Navarro, 2008, 135). Some people do it naturally, but for most of us it takes effort and practice. It's important to keep the gestures controlled so that they don't distract the listener, but use them to embellish your proposals and attract their subconscious attention.

A non verbal gesture that will help build rapport and subconsciously heighten positive feelings, is the casual use of thumbs up displays. As with most of these skills, it is important to practice and get a feel of the appropriate timing and frequency with which to use these gestures. If you subtly incorporate thumbs up gestures to your hand movements whilst you speak, you will be projecting a positive attitude that will help you make a conversation go by smoothly.

Finally, whether you are speaking or listening, there is one nonverbal skill that is very hard to mimic but if done effectively, will project confidence, build rapport and encourage a mutual understanding with the other parties. When we are comfortable, our facial muscles usually relax and our head tends to tilt to the side. This behavior exposes our neck and is therefore something that our limbic brain will only permit in safe and comfortable situations (Navarro, 2008, 170). To master this reaction and be comfortable enough to display such a behavior in a negotiation setting, would certainly provide a valuable way of showing others our willingness to work together. Couple that with a natural smile and you will have set the perfect conditions for a positive negotiation where all parties benefit and real value is created.

Concluding Remarks:

Applying these nonverbal skills is challenging and they require practice to employ effectively. Use them along with the propositional method of negotiation outlined in Roger Fisher's book; *Getting to Yes*, and hopefully more and more win – win agreements will be reached, instead of traditional bargaining where parties tend to feel left out. All of these skills will also accompany you in your different interactions with close ones and colleagues. So whether you find yourself negotiating an international treatise, or just recommending a particular attire to your loved one, remember to smile and use this knowledge towards the mutual benefit of a satisfying agreement.

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