



# You Don't Say ...

## Honing Nonverbal Communication Skills

Jeff Thoren, an EVT editorial advisory board member, is an ICF-certified coach and the founder of Gifted Leaders, LLC ([giftedleaders.com](http://giftedleaders.com)).

**You walk into your family physician's office slightly early for your scheduled appointment.**

Two staff members are sitting behind the front counter with their heads lowered, focused on their tasks. Several minutes pass before one turns to you, forces a smile, and says, "Hi ... you can sign in here," pointing to a clipboard.

Finally, you are ushered in to see the doctor, who spends a lot of time writing notes but doesn't make much eye contact. You don't feel like he really understood your concerns or answered your questions. On the way out, you see a sign that reads, *We treat all patients and their families with the utmost respect and consideration.* "Yeah, right!" you think to yourself. Your perception of the health care team is that they weren't respectful and caring at all—more like aloof, distracted, and uncaring.

*Despite our best intentions, there is often a disconnect between messages we intend to communicate and the nonverbal cues that people receive.*

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## Team Exercise **Buddy Up**

Provide feedback to coworkers by teaming up with a buddy for a week to observe one another.

Rate your observations on a scale of 1 to 5 and, most important, share suggestions and ideas for small steps to sharpen your skills in each area. Share your findings and plans to improve at your next staff meeting.



1. **Eye contact.** Is this source of connection missing, too intense, or just right?
2. **Facial expression.** What is your face showing? Is it mask-like and unexpressive, or emotionally present and filled with interest? How much smiling are you doing?
3. **Body movements and posture.** Does your body look tense and immobile, or relaxed? Is your posture more open or closed? (See *Body movements and posture, at right.*) What messages are your movements and posture sending to others?
4. **Gestures.** What do your gestures look like? Are they natural, or mechanical or fidgety?
5. **Proximity.** Are you positioning yourself at an appropriate distance? Is your position in relation to the other person enhancing or getting in the way of effective communication?
6. **Voice.** Does your voice project warmth, confidence, and concern, or is it strained, tentative, or irritated?
7. **Sounds.** Do you use encouraging sounds to indicate that you are paying attention to the other person?

### • **Body movements and posture.**

We receive messages from the way someone walks, stands, and sits. When the body is in a state of relaxed alertness, it suggests both comfort and interest in the other person. Watch out for nervous movements like jingling change. When your body is in an open position (at least at a 45° angle with the other person), it communicates that you are also open and receptive, resulting in interpersonal connection. Speaking with your back turned (a closed posture) communicates lack of interest. Lean forward when listening, stand straight when speaking, and when appropriate, use a firm handshake.

• **Gestures.** When it comes to gesturing, avoid extremes. If you fail to gesture while speaking, you may be perceived as boring and stiff. The key is to be expressive without overdoing it. Natural gestures are neither rigid nor fidgety. Head nodding is one simple form of gesturing that can help communicate that you are listening and engaged.

• **Proximity.** Position yourself as close as you—and more importantly the other person—feel comfortable. Physical barriers such as a reception counter or an exam table can impede communication, so move away when possible. And try to get on the same eye level to avoid talking “down” to someone (Learn more about proximity on [page 20](#).)

• **Voice.** Nonverbal speech elements such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm, and rate provide subtle clues into our true feelings and what we really mean.

• **Sounds.** Sounds that convey understanding, such as “ahhh,” “uh huh,” and “really?” uttered with congruent eye and facial gestures communicate understanding and emotional connection. More than words, these sounds are the language of interest, understanding, and compassion.

## The Power of Nonverbal Communication

In veterinary medicine, good communication is the foundation of effective client service, but we can easily forget that building relationships with clients—and people in general—is not limited to words. Nonverbal cues also have an enormous impact.

Most of us have heard that much of human communication is nonverbal. The exact percentage is debatable (some say more than 90%) but let's assume that it's at least 50%. How we embellish words with nonverbal language projects our truer intentions. Gestures, the way we sit, how close we stand, and eye contact all affect how we're perceived by others.

### The Basics

Here are some guidelines for several “attending”—defined as giving one's physical attention to someone—skills. You may think you already know all of this, but I challenge you to take a closer look to assess how well you really implement each behavior.

- **Eye contact.** Natural and direct eye contact indicates your attention and interest in the other person. We've all experienced someone whose shifting eyes indicate lack of attention or discomfort; in contrast, try to maintain fairly constant eye contact. But be careful not to stare; it can be perceived as aggression.
- **Facial expressions.** To show understanding and empathy, facial expressions should be appropriate to the topic under discussion. One specific facial expression, smiling, is an especially powerful cue. A genuine smile conveys likability, friendliness, and approachability.

**Skillsets addressed in this article: relational competencies; self-knowledge; social awareness**

The body doesn't lie ... it reveals what we're really thinking and feeling.

Remember that verbal and nonverbal communication work together to convey a message. You can improve your spoken communication by using nonverbal signals and gestures that reinforce and support what you're saying. By paying careful attention to nonverbal behavior and practicing with others, you can dramatically improve your communication skills. ●