

# EVERY LITTLE MOVEMENT

## HAS A MEANING OF ITS OWN

by  
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In a popular musical of the fifties, *Kismet*, a beggar who earns his living telling stories, is sentenced, for some offense I don't recall, to have his hand chopped off. Hadj, the beggar, realizes, as we all realize, that the hand is a valued instrument of communication. Without his hand, Hadj couldn't tell his stories; hence, he couldn't make a living. In a song called "Gesticulate," he makes an impassioned plea to the chief magistrate:

When you tell a story  
Amorous or Gory,  
You can tell it best  
If you gesticulate.

A tongue is a tongue  
And a lung is a lung  
And a tale they can shout or sing;  
Without the gesture --  
Nothing.

To make a long story short, the beggar keeps his hand, continues to tell stories, and becomes a rich man. Obviously Hadj, the beggar, recognized the importance of the gesture, and apparently all of you recognize the importance of gesturing in communication. I hope I will not disappoint you by telling you that I cannot give you any magic methods for successful gesturing, but I do hope you will find helpful some of my suggestions about not only gestures, but about the whole realm of non-verbal communication.

The term **non-verbal communication** indicates all those aspects of communicating which accompany the verbal, the words. Psychologist Albert Mehrabian contends that 93 per cent of the communication of the speaker's feelings comes from non-verbal communication. What are the non-verbal aspects of communication?

- 1) Appearance
- 2) Gestures
- 3) Posture
- 4) Eye Contact
- 5) Facial Expressions
- 6) Vocal Cues -- not the words you speak, but how you speak them.

7) Spatial Relations -- the effect of distance between the speaker and the listeners.

These aspects of non-verbal communication come quite naturally to all of us in our day-to-day communicating. We wouldn't wear jeans and sloppy sweatshirts to an interview because we know they will convey to the interviewer that the interviewee is a slob. If one of you is slouching in your seat or resting your head lazily on your fist, I might judge by your posture that my words aren't interesting you. Don't we often say that we can read a friend's true feelings in his eyes? A smile from an associate at work can "make your day." The tone of voice in one's comment tells more than one's words. And to illustrate to you the effect of spatial relations in communicating, let me ask you whether you'd consider it appropriate to shout your most intimate remarks to your dearest friend across the vaulted ballroom of a big hotel.

What does all of this have to do with speech-making? Just this. The successful speaker must be constantly aware of how this non-verbal communicating affects the verbal, the content of his presentation. Sometimes the non-verbal provides such distractions that the audience misses the message. On the contrary, when the non-verbal and verbal are appropriately coordinated, the non-verbal most certainly enhances the verbal.

My first suggestion is that you remove non-verbal distractions when you speak. Your dress can distract your audience. But it is possible for speakers to overdress. Bright colors, flashy jewelry, unusual style, extreme hairdos detract. Dress neutrally, but attractively. The most successful high school speech coaches in Wisconsin, Art and Ruth McMillion, guided their students in the selection of the clothing worn in competition.

Another non-verbal distraction is poor posture. Speakers must find a stance that is comfortable for them. A problem I have in coaching high school girls is to get them to stand like ladies. They are so ac-

customed to wearing pants that they stand with legs wide apart, and they find it difficult to adjust their stance when they wear skirts. Speakers should not stand in attention as soldiers do, but their bodies shouldn't slouch either. Feet need not be planted in one place for the entire presentation. There is no rule that a speaker cannot take small steps now and then.

A third non-verbal distraction is poor eye contact. A good communicator must look at his audience. S/he should be able to read reactions on the faces of his audience, and these reactions encourage her in her presentation. Too often speakers stare at an individual in the audience, or they follow the bad advice of an elementary school teacher who told them that starting at a spot above the heads of the audience and at the rear of the auditorium would help them overcome nervousness.

Certainly a speaker must be aware of involuntary gestures and movements s/he uses that distract the audience. We've all seen speakers who rock from foot to foot, who twist their hair or ear lobes, who scratch their noses, heads, and other parts of their anatomy. You are not helping a budding speaker by not calling his attention to these habits, and s/he, in turn, perhaps by rehearsing in front of a mirror, must strive to eliminate them.

So much, then, for coping with the non-verbal distractions. What can the speaker do to appropriately coordinate the verbal and the non-verbal? Ancient rhetoricians devised a series of stock gestures to suggest human emotions. A good speaker or actor would be sure to accumulate a repertoire of these stock gestures. Note, for instance, **caution** (the speaker places his left hand, palm outward, a few inches from his chin and his right hand, palm outward, about a foot ahead of and a bit to the right of his left hand), **denial** (the speaker looks to the left, places his left hand, palm outward, on the right side of his chin, and extends the right arm, palm outward, to his right side), and **submission** (the speaker bows his head, bends his elbows, places his right hand on

his left shoulder and his left hand on his right shoulder, creating an X across his chest). Except for the period when they were in vogue in 19th century melodrama, these ancient gestures have been out of style for centuries. Shakespeare himself shows his disdain for them when he has Hamlet advise the players:

...do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently;

...Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action;

Well, how can we learn to "suit our actions to our words?" The answer is -- we can't. We can't, because we cannot learn something that we already know. Observe your friends in their daily conversations. They speak with their arms and hands, with their eyes, with their bodies. The trick is to transfer the non-verbal skills that we so naturally use in conversation to the formal speaking situation. Gestures naturally spring from ideas. In my work with forensic students, I have found many who gesture effectively the very first speech they give. Those who find gesturing difficult usually set up barriers for themselves that prohibit gestures. Fearing that their arms and hands will embarrass them somehow during a speech, they cup their hands in front of their tummies, or they clasp them behind their backs. When the hands are held in such positions, they are not free to gesture. Let your arms hang loosely at your sides, and when you sense they want to move, let them move. They want to help you convey your message, and they won't do the wrong thing.

Sometimes my students write gestures into their speeches: "At this point raise the right arm above the head and take two steps to the left." These cues rarely work. Sooner or later, all the speakers on the Ripon High School forensic team overcome the gesture problem. How? They rehearse. When they become accustomed to public speaking, when public speaking becomes as natural to them as friendly conversation, then there are no problems with gestures. I suggest to you that the more speaking you do, the more effective your gestures will be.

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