

# Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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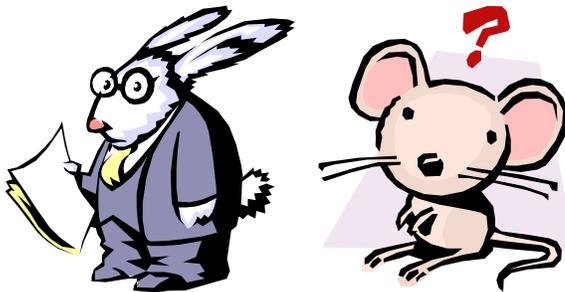
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## Communication Skills, Part III

This is the third article in a series about communications in the workplace. In our March Newsletter we looked at sender-receiver distortions, and we sought to define “assertive communication.” We continue our series this month with the topics of **body language and energy patterns** and **how to avoid becoming defensive**. If you are new to our Newsletters, feel free to send along comments or questions to [info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com](mailto:info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com).

### Body Language and Energy Patterns

Entire books have been written on this subject, but a good reference to consult would be Edward T. Hall’s *The Silent Language*, on cultural differences in



nonverbal communication.

Those aspects of body language which forcefully communicate are

- ◆ Posture
- ◆ Facial expressions
- ◆ Hand gestures
- ◆ Body movements
- ◆ Energy levels

As a speaker, our posture should be inclined slightly toward

our listener, so that at the proper moment we are ready to exchange places and become a receiver in the ongoing dialog.

Hand gestures should not be violent or sporadic. Instead our palms may be in a slightly upward position, and our movements should be slow. We will want to refrain from any dismissive movements, just as we would from frowning or making ugly faces.

Our listener will also pick up on our energy level and the kind of energy we are emitting. A low energy level, or even depression, will be reflected in a drooping head and listless movements. High energy will be reflected in crisp, but not erratic or jerky, movements, plus a welcoming smile.

All of these potent nonverbals can best be practiced using role play in front of a camcorder. The camera does not lie! You will find that you will improve your communication by at least 80% by intentionally choosing your nonverbal responses, and that you can do this by studying yourself on videotape. With time and practice, you may even find yourself mimicking the stance of your listener. This often happens to therapists when they are truly “following” the patient. When you are nonverbally in sync with your listener, you convey a much deeper understanding than words alone can express.

### Listening Skills — and How NOT to Become Defensive

There are three phases to each “bite” of communication:

- ◆ Attending skills
- ◆ Encouraging skills
- ◆ Reflecting (or feedback) skills

## ATTENDING SKILLS

The presupposition, whether we are the speaker or the listener, is that we have the “right” environment for our dialog — that the space is private and comfortable, and that it creates *the experience of safety* for both parties. A listener who is “attending” is open, centered in him/herself, and probably positioned forward a bit toward the speaker.

If we have a reluctant audience, we probably need to use some encouraging skills, such as a “door opener”: “So how are things going for you today?” A question about the listener’s favorite hobby or about a family member might also be appropriate. When the reason for the conversation is introduced, we want to use OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS, such as, “*How did you feel you handled that?*” instead of rhetorical questions, such as “*It didn’t go too well, did it?*” or closed-ended questions, such as “*Did you finish step one in the project layout?*”

Closed-ended questions allow only a *yes/no* response, whereas an open-ended question such as “*How is step one in the project layout going?*” allows the listener to give you much more information.

## ENCOURAGING SKILLS

When a reluctant speaker is finally opening up, you as listener need to suspend questions and instead encourage the speaker with some of the most important words in the English language — *uh-huh, ah, um-hum, oh, wow!* Given good eye contact and open body posture, these words can work wonders in helping the speaker feel understood and appreciated. Other “minimal encouragers” would be

- Tell me more.
- How did (does) that make you feel?
- I HEAR YOU.
- That’s sure tough.

## REFLECTING SKILLS

Reflecting skills come at the end of a “bite” or unit of communication. They are the feedback that you as listener give to the speaker in the form of paraphrasing his/her message. This feedback enables the other person to feel understood and to move on to the next phase of dialog. On the simplest level, you reflect back to the speaker the *content* of his/her message. It is even more important to give feedback on any emotions which you can identify. An example of reflecting skills in practice would be, “You seem annoyed about that.” Or “Correct me if I’m wrong,

but are you also feeling hurt, not just irritated, about Jim’s behavior?” NEVER ascribe feelings or meanings to your partner’s communication. Always allow the speaker to claim his/her own feelings/meanings. Thus, in the first quote, you do not tell the speaker that s/he is annoyed but suggest that it *seems* s/he is annoyed. In the second quote, you specifically ask the speaker to identify and own his/her feelings in the communication.

## WHEN SOMEONE BECOMES DEFENSIVE



Individuals who feel threatened usually become *defensive*; that is, they are defended against experiencing emotional pain. Negative criticism and blaming cause emotional pain. If we feel

at fault for a costly mistake, we may tend to further exacerbate the blame by “beating ourselves up” or by accepting the guilt. Even unwarranted accusations may predispose us to becoming defensive. Look at it this way:

Threatened > Defended behavior > Defensive  
employee & accusations supervisor

This sequence can be broken, however, if the supervisor comes into the encounter determined to listen and actually *learn* something from it. When we make a commitment to remain nondefensive, we can hear the KERNEL OF TRUTH which the other person is offering us. Example: A threatened employee’s voice becomes louder and higher pitched as he avers, “But you’re the one who told me to do it that way. Maybe **you** should rethink the procedure.” What’s the kernel of truth in this accusation? Perhaps there *is* one aspect of the procedure that could use revision. The employee may be exaggerating, but the silver lining to this cloud is that procedures can always be revised to work better.

Here are some things to think about as you work on becoming less defensive when someone throws an accusation at you:

- ◇ There’s a kernel of truth in every accusation, and this can lead to a more positive outcome.
- ◇ Put it in perspective — don’t swat the elephant when it’s the fly that’s bothering you.

- ◇ Determine to learn from the kernel of truth.
- ◇ Maintain calm through centering, using deep, slow breathing. Thank the person for the kernel of truth.
- ◇ Return to the original issue.
- ◇ Congratulate yourself by affirming, *“I am learning to handle conflict and criticism,” “I am learning to speak truthfully,” “I am becoming a stronger and healthier person.”*

Next month we continue our series on “Communication in the Workplace” with a communication skills checkup and a more detailed look at how to handle conflictual conversations.

**Stay tuned to Beyond the Horizons Consulting Newsletters for timely information to solve your management challenges! Please feel free to write us at**

[info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com](mailto:info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com)

**or to call us at 505-466-4990 to schedule a free, complimentary coaching session or consultation for your business needs.**

**Beyond the Horizons Consulting offers a variety of services for individuals, teams, and organizations.**

- ◆ **Individual coaching for managers is a process that begins by identifying your style, what you want to retain and strengthen, and what you want to modify. Objective assessments are part of the process, as are also a mutual give-and-take process of creative problem solving and supportive guidance.**
- ◆ **We offer group seminars on identifying and dealing with stress in a relaxing and supportive environment.**
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- ◆ **Our communication seminars identify the several parts of the communication equation and help you put them all together by using role play, among other practical, hands-on experiences.**

- ◆ **We also offer group seminars on teamwork, using the MBTI or DISC.**
- ◆ **Our conflict resolution services help opposing parties identify mutual purpose(s) and restore harmony to your workplace environment.**
- ◆ **It is our pleasure to tailor a seminar to your company’s, department’s, or team’s needs!**

**Take a look at our May and June, 2005, Newsletters to see our new, serene home, a place we invite you to take advantage of!**

**Call us to schedule a complimentary consultation for yourself or your business!**

**Our helpful Office Administrator, Stan, will work with you to schedule a meeting time that fits your schedule.**

**Stan and Jean Eva can be reached at  
(505) 466-4990**