Effective Communication

Communication is a skill we start to learn from the moment we are born, when we first laugh at seeing our mother's face. We do it all the time; we say and hear things, we read and write, catch a glance or wag a finger. These are all forms of communication. We learn to communicate from the moment we are born, but you can learn to be more alert to the signals people are sending you, and that you are sending out yourself. You can also learn how to make better use of the different methods of communication available to you, to better suit the channel to your message and to your audience and so improve the effectiveness of your communication.
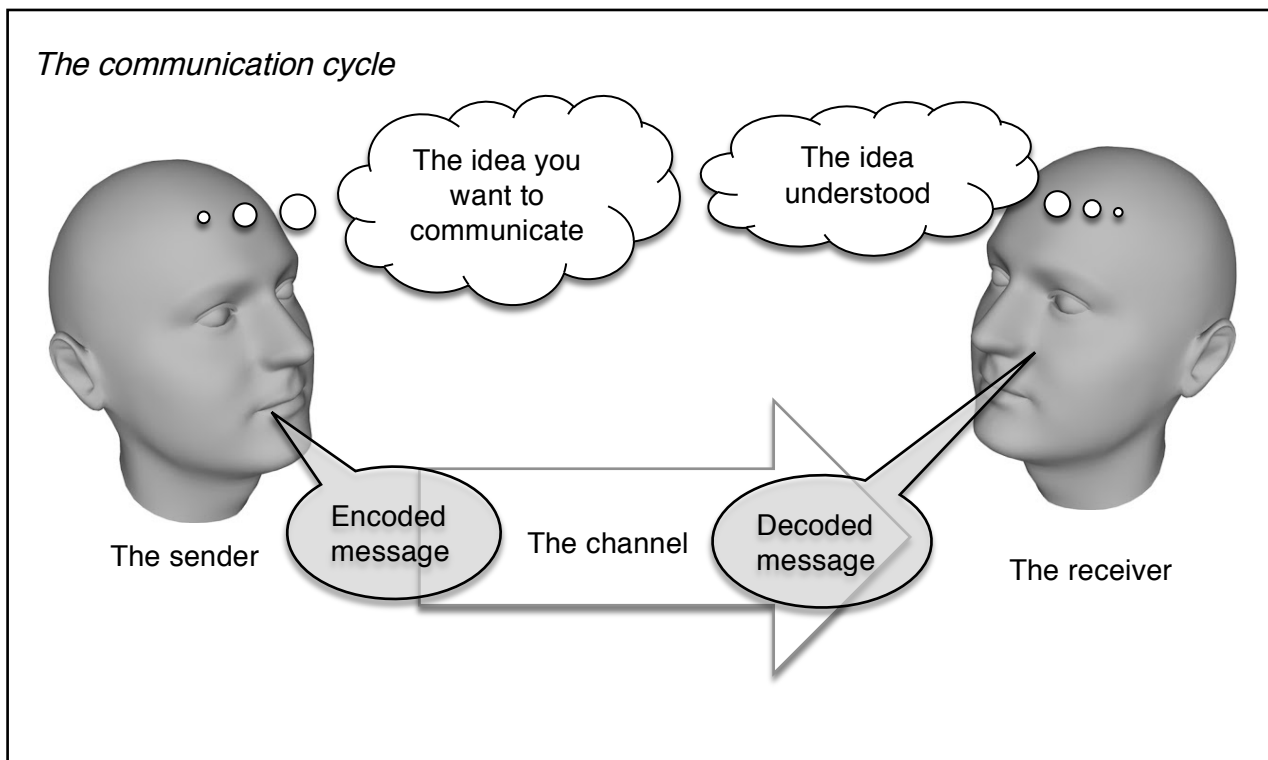
The communication cycle

All types of communication - written, oral, non-verbal - involve the following elements:

Someone (the *sender*)

- has something that they want to communicate (the *idea*)
- which they convert into a message of some sort (*encode*)
- and send to someone else (the *receiver*)
- via some means (the *channel*)

Back in 1949 two Bell Telephone Company engineers (Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver) established what is now often referred to as the *communication cycle,* based on these elements. The idea of *feedback* (from the receiver to the sender) was added to the model, creating the concept of a cycle.

The communication cycle

The idea you want to communicate		The idea understood
The sender	Encoded message	The channel Decoded message The receiver

Although we can use the cycle as a vehicle for exploring communication, it's important not to build too much into it. It was developed to help make sense of the technical issues associated with telephone communication, not for the wider exploration of human communication. Having said that, it is a useful model. For example, Shannon and Weaver talked about *encoding* and *decoding* the message (which is what telephones do), and this can also be used as a metaphor for the way that we also use codes in messages - words and phrases, tones of voice, etc - which we expect receivers to decode.

They also talked about *noise* - we've all suffered noise on the line at some point - which is the extraneous sounds that can interfere with a message being received clearly. There can be also sorts of interference with our messages; look at this simple communication:

What I meant	What I said	What was heard	What was understood
Stop coming in late	I need to know that everyone will be in on time in the morning	We all have to be in work on time tomorrow	Something is happening tomorrow

What we mean to say, what we actually say, what is heard and what is understood may all be very different. The receivers of the message will *construct a meaning* from the words they see or hear. In other words, they will use a range of clues to try and work out what you really mean.

This why the *context* is so important. Context is the setting (where and when we say or write it) in which we are deciding what to say, which is different from the setting in which the receivers hear or read it, and understand it. Someone who is irritated by the lateness of one of the members of their team is probably feeling a bit angry and has possibly themselves been rebuked for allowing timekeeping to become so lax. That's the context in which they constructed the message.

The receiver doesn't know any of this, focuses on the phrase 'in the morning' and construct a meaning to this - that something is happening in the morning. When nothing happens, the receiver will think that they were being misled, whilst the sender will think 'My message was received and understood as the person was in on time for once'!

Communication researchers also emphasise the way that relationships shape the language we use and the way that we construct meanings around it. You say different things to your close family compared to your friends or work colleagues, and how you speak to those at work will also reflect differences in hierarchies - you talk or write differently to someone who is more senior, more junior or of equal position.

More significantly, you will speak differently to people you like and to those you dislike, just as these feelings will affect how someone receives and makes sense of what you say or write. Words that are meant in fun can be taken as serious by someone who thinks you don't like them, just as you may choose to be very formal in how you talk to someone you really don't like.

Everyone has a particular perception of themselves - not what they look like but who they are. You must have met people who seem full of themselves and their own self-importance, whilst other people seem to have a really low sense of self-esteem and personal worth, both of which seem quite unconnected with their real value as a person (in your eyes at least). We all have a sense of *self* - of our place in any social setting and how we want to be treated by others.

This also shapes how we speak and write (from the pompous to the self-effacing) and how others make sense of our message. Sometimes this will be reflected in the language we use, such as trying to sound clever by using complex words or phrases (and sometimes mis-using them) or by name-dropping. By adding complexity to simple messages we may feel we are reflecting our expertise, when the receiver thinks you're simply being long-winded or self-important. Equally, by using deliberately simple language we may think we are being clear when we are seen as insulting the intelligence of the receivers, who feel they are being talked down to. All of this shapes how we construct the message and how the receiver makes sense of it.

Context also includes our culture or background. Culture is about shared understandings - we have an idea how people will think about things due to that shared culture. This can be a social culture (being from the same national culture or being part of a minority group within that national culture, or a particular social class), a professional or technical culture, or an organisational culture.

The communication cycle was originally developed to help address technical issues in telephone engineering, not to explain all aspects of communication. What we have seen is how many other complexities need to be added in. As we can see, the reality is a much more complex scenario in which the amazing thing is that people communicate with each other at all!

Face-to-face communication

We all learn to speak at around the time we first learn to walk - towards the end of the first year of our lives, so speaking and listening are skills we have norms experience of using when we become adults. Given that, how much do we need to learn about oral communication in the workplace? Clearly, not any of the basics, but there are so many situations where we need to use speaking and listening in particular ways, and this section is all about them.

When we speak to each other, our conversation depends on far more than just the words we use; it is just as much about how we say those words and the various non-verbal signals that we also employ to amplify (or distort) the message. For example, read this short statement aloud (or in your head if that's not possible), without putting a specific emphasis on any one word:

<p align="center">"I think you deserve a pay rise"</p>

Now say it again with the emphasis on the first word ('I'). Then, switch the emphasis to the second word ('think'), followed by emphasising 'you', 'deserve' and finally 'rise'. Each time you change the emphasis you change the meaning. The emphasis on 'I' suggests others don't; the emphasis on 'think' suggests uncertainty, whereas emphasising 'you' implies others don't. Emphasising 'deserve' implies that there is a strong case for the rise, and by emphasising 'rise' it suggests that pay may actually be falling.

And all that is only emphasising one word; emphasise two words and you get further subtleties of meaning. On top of that you can use facial expressions, eye contact (or no contact), hand and arm gestures, shoulder shrugs, *proximity* (how close we are) and *posture* (how you sit or stand). For example, emphasising 'think' coupled with no eye contact (eg eyes fixed on the ground) and a semi-crouching posture (suggesting embarrassment or even fear) makes this into a significantly different message from a smiling face, open posture, direct eye contact and emphasis on 'deserve'.

In the 1960s an American psychologist called Albert Mehrabian conducted research into oral, face to face communication and concluded that 7% of the message was conveyed by the words, 38% by the tone of voice and 55% by their non-verbal communication or *body language* (*facial expressions, gestures, posture* and *proximity*). These figures are regularly quoted, but you need to treat them with care. It was experimental research, it was in a specific setting, and it was a fairly small sample. However, it does emphasise just how much we communicate around the words we use. The Appendix contains more about non-verbal communication.

Conversations - two or more people together are the most common form of communication, from the most informal (such as greetings or water-cooler chats) to formal one to ones with your line manager are the most straightforward form of oral communication. The number of people is usually low, you will have some idea who the others are, and there is generally a purpose. Most conversations, even the most formal, usually start with ice-breaker elements - 'How was your holiday?' - to establish a *rapport*.

Rapport means that you get on well together, are relaxed and feel you understand each other. It is hard to establish a good rapport when the relationship is lopsided - one person is more powerful, in control and directing. Even things like having a big desk or one person sitting lower down than the other can all prevent the creation of a rapport between them. As you know, effective communication involves the sending and receiving of a message; if one party is using the conversation to assert authority or some other objective, it makes the transmission problematic and so people will be inhibited about speaking and less ready to question or challenge where they feel it needs doing. It ceases to be a conversation and becomes a monologue.

Feedback – a response from the receiver - tells you more than just that the message was received, it can also tell you how the message was understood. When we send a message we have something in our head which we want to communicate. We turn the idea into words (we encode it) and then send this as the message. The receiver hears or reads our words (with or without any distortion from extraneous noise) and decodes them. The feedback goes through the same process, although it may not be words as such, but could be noises ('Mm'), gestures (nodding perhaps) or a facial expression (such as smiling).

It doesn't matter if you are speaking to one person or a whole conference hall full of people, you need to be alert to the feedback you are getting. Sometimes it will be a simple acknowledgement that the person is listening to what you say, sometimes signalling that they want to respond, and sometimes that they just aren't interested. Communication is a two way process; one criticism of Shannon and Weaver' model is that is really a model of information transmission, like a radio or TV, rather than being about real human interaction.

Be a good listener

Effective communication isn't all about sending messages (speaking); it's equally about listening - in fact, listening is probably more important than speaking. After all. we are nearly all born with two ears, but only one mouth, so use them in that proportion. What's more, if you *listen actively* to what people say, then you will understand what they are interested in, what they want to know and what they are likely to hear and understand. We all listen to hints all the time - we can be doing one thing and listening in to a conversation going on behind us, especially if we're sitting on a train and it's someone on their mobile! But active listening is different; it involves:

1. *Comprehending* - hearing and understanding (correctly decoding) the other person's message

2. *Retaining* - remembering what they said, at least for long enough to review it in our heads and identify the key messages

3. *Responding* - summarising back to confirm understanding and, where appropriate, to *reframe* it into a slightly different format that is more in line with what we would like them to think or do.

Also, be aware of your own feelings (emotional state) when you are communicating with others, especially if it's important. Heightened emotions can cause us to say things we wouldn't say if we were calmer. This is because our emotional brain acts faster than our higher cognitive functions (ie our thinking) and can affect how we make sense (decode) of what others are saying and how we react to it. It's always good to ask yourself the question, before important communications:

- How am I feeling about this? How is this affecting me?

- How is/are the other person/people feeling? How is this likely to affect them?

The process of asking these questions does two things -it delays your actions long enough for your thinking to catch up with your feeling, and it enables you to make use of the conclusions you reach, to communicate better.

'Intermediated' conversation

A conversation where the channel is face to face is the most common, but we are having to converse increasingly through electronic media - so the conversation is said to be *intermediated.* Using a 'phone to speak to people is so common that it we can overlook some of the problems it creates. After all, the look on our face can be critical to the conversation, and this is lost on the 'phone. Of course, we can still use tone of voice and emphasis, as well as the choice of words and phrases to enhance meaning, but some of this effect is lost when on the telephone. 'Noise' from interference on the line to the distorting effect of the technology can all diminish the subtlety we expect from face to face conversations.

Video conferencing, where we can see the person we're talking to overcomes this, but it's still different from being face to face, there is an artificiality about it, and eye contact (such an important of communicating with others) is very difficult, because people look at the screen not the camera. Whether it's by 'phone or video-call, the initial steps of establishing a rapport are even more crucial, as this helps to overcome the barrier that the medium presents. Of course, the more you know someone, the easier and quicker it is, but you will find that the proportion of time you spend in this initial relationship-forming is usually greater than face to face conversations. Don't try to reduce this, but recognise it as a critical part of ensuring effective communication.

Putting it in writing

Written communication has changed out of all recognition over the last few decades; although email was first used in 1971, it only became widely available at the tail end of the 1980s. Texting (SMS messaging) is even more recent, only getting going in the 1990s, with instant messaging having a similar history. Tweeting (2006) and the use of social media like Facebook (2004) and Linked In (2003) to communicate with other people are even more recent.

Before digital communications became ubiquitous, organisations relied on letters (external) and memoranda (internal) for their written communications. Both of these had quite strict protocols about how they were styled and laid out - because they tended to be typed by trained and qualified third parties (secretaries and typists), these rules were widely obeyed.

Digital communications has caused one of the most significant changes in employment practices and meant that the authors of written communications now control their channel, style and layout. This can cause problems, and many large organisations strive to ensure some standardisation. There is also a communication overload, with far too much traffic creating 'noise' - it's hard to pick out what is important from what isn't.

Speech and writing are two very different channels of communication. When we speak we have all the other non-verbal cues to add richness to our conversation - we can smile, maintain eye contact, stand close and emphasise points with hand gestures. Even on the 'phone we can use our tone of voice to help make our message clearer. At the same time, we tend to be much messier in the way we construct our messages. We use fillers ('um', 'er, and the now ubiquitous 'so'), construct endless sentences, break the rules of grammar, change direction and rely on the response of the listener to fill in elements.

Letters, by contrast, are expected to have a clear structure, use correct grammar and spelling, and are designed to be received passively - the receiver reads but shouldn't be expected to have to fill in gaps in the content. On the other hand, instant messages (where text appears on the receiver's screen more or less as it is entered by the sender) are called 'chat' because they are more like speech in their form rather than following the conventions of written communication. In this section we will explore how the style of written communication is determined by the channel being used.

Letters

Letters are the most formal of communications and should still follow the traditional conventions. These rules (really conventions) are what make letters so authoritative. As they have declined in use, their authority has increased. They may be sent as an attachment to an email, but that just emphasises their importance - if it was less important then all that would be sent is the email. A letter does more than communicate its content; it also communicates this authority, as it is headed with the organisation's logo, name and address. It is being sent on behalf of the organisation and is treated with greater respect because of that.

All of this may sound pedantic, but the effect that presentation can have on the receiver is part of the message being communicated. A poorly written letter, with grammatical and spelling errors, which doesn't follow those conventions says that the sender doesn't care. On the other hand, the use of complex language to express simple ideas says 'I am being pretentious'!

Email

How many emails do you get in a day? Some lucky people only get a few, others get dozens, even hundreds. Smartphones and tablets mean that we can have constant access to email, and it has led to a blurring of the lines between work and personal life. An email is fast and highly economical channel for sending written communication; the speed with which they can be sent does tend to create sense of urgency - we might not expect a reply from a letter for several days, but we expect emails to be responded to within hours (at most), sometime immediately. The problem with this is that the channel carries a sense of the message being urgent when it may not be. Also, because of the speed with which emails can be sent, they tend to be written more hurriedly than a formal letter would be, which can cause problems.

Here are six simple rules that will improve the effectiveness of your email communication, making it more likely they will be read, understood and responded to as you intended:

1. You can use *informal language*, but don't be sloppy, especially when sending emails to external recipients. Sloppy writing implies sloppy thinking and lack of care.

2. Be *focussed* - be clear what you want to say - if it requires several answers to questions or is part of a discussion, wouldn't a 'phone call be better?

3. Only use *capital letters* as you would in any written communication, as it is harder to read text in capitals, and looks as if you are shouting.

4. Be very careful about why you are using the *copy* ('cc') and *blind copy* ('bcc') functions. Copying someone in implies it is for their information, and they are not expected to take any action. Do they really need to know? Blind copies are for confidentiality - you don't want other recipients to know that someone is also seeing the message or you are keeping their addresses secret, for privacy reasons.

5. Never use *reply all* unless it is absolutely essential!

6. Only *forward* something that others will really want to see - and that doesn't include pictures of kittens off the Internet, jokes, or tear-jerking poems!

Like most rules, these are more for guidance then blind obedience, but if you want your emails to be read and understood, they will certainly help.

Texting and instant messaging

The most informal of all written communication, they are generally used as a form of written speech, so most of the rules are relaxed, as long as the message can be understood. However, despite the attraction of doing so, always ask if a 'phone call would do the job better, as you can get far more information over, and in a more nuanced way, by talking. What both texting and instant messaging can do is to enable simple messages to be passed quickly; for work purposes, that's really all they should be used for.

Like all forms of written communication, you can never be sure who will read what you have written. Computer display screens are visible to anyone walking behind the receiver; letters, emails and texts can be misdirected and go to the wrong person; and you have no idea how the other person will decode what you have written. One Finnish researcher once lay down rules for written communication which started with the most important - if it's possible for what you have written to be misunderstood, it will be, and in the worst possible way! You will quickly pick up on a misunderstanding when talking face to face and can correct it; it's much harder with written communication.

Selecting the channel

Effective communication depends on the sender having a clear message, sending it through a channel to the receiver who must then make sense of it. The context in which the message is created and received will shape its meaning and the degree to which what the sender means to say is what is understood at the other end. You have also learnt about the ways that oral, non-verbal and written communication - the different channels you can use - also affect the how the message is constructed and how it is received and made sense of.

In this section we will look at how you should go about selecting the most appropriate channel for the communication you want to send. The challenge to anybody, whatever their role in an organisation, is to make sure that the messages they send are received and understood as well as possible, and selecting the right channel is a critical element of this.

The Canadian academic Marshall McLuhan became famous for a single statement - t*he medium is the message.* What he meant by that, and it is a very important meaning, is that 'Each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique message.' If you read a letter, the fact that it was a letter has an effect on the your emotional state and your understanding of what it says. The same core message (the words

and the ideas that lie behind them) in an email or in a 'phone call will be different because they come to you in a different channel (medium[1]).

Why is it different? In part because it implies a different relationship between the sender and receiver, but also because the channel implies something different by its nature, the sort of things we have discussed already. A letter is formal, a text message very informal; an oral conversation, face to face can take various forms, all of which change how we receive the information being passed to us, just as we do in a 'phone or video call. Frequently it will just seem right to use a particular channel to send a message and you choose it without thinking; however, in your subconscious mind, below the threshold of conscious thought, you have weighed up the choices and decided 'this is the right way to do it'.

When selecting the channel, questions about which ones are available and whether or not a particular channel enables specific characteristics of the message to be met (like confidentiality, for example) need to be considered. These narrow down the options, perhaps to only one, which makes the decision relatively simple. However, if practicality still allows choices, then you need to think about formality, relationships and the significance and urgency of the message.

Formality

This is something we have come across several times; some communication channels are, by their very nature, more formal than others. A chaired meeting, a structured interview and a letter, all make the communication that much more formal. Of course, they aren't the only characteristics that matter. For example, a formal interview, with a panel sitting behind a table and the interviewee alone in a chair several feet away is more formal than if the chairs were in a half-circle with any table in between, and the all the participants were close together. The distance reduces proximity from the *public* to the *social-consultative* and even, possibly, to the *personal-casual*. Face to face communication, depending on context, can range from the very informal to the very formal; when such meetings aren't possible, substitutes don't always provide such a variety. Video calls are never going to be as informal as a face to face meeting can be, and even 'phone calls still introduce a small element of formality, especially as most non-verbal elements are reduced or eliminated from the conversation.

Relationships

How well do the sender and receiver know each other, and how good is the relationship? Things like our relative positions in a hierarchy (is one more senior than the other), our relative locations within an organisation, or being in different organisations, or being customers or suppliers, all affect how we relate to each other. As a rule, the degree of informality between a customer and supplier or between a more and a less senior employee is dictated by the customer and the more senior employee; it is up to them to decide whether or not to use first names or to use particular channels of communication. Power or authority are important in relationships, and it is important to be alert to this when choosing how you might communicate with others.

Significance and urgency

To some extent, this overlaps with practicality, and it raises similar issues. If the issue is particularly *significant* (ie it stands out from other related issues) or is particularly *urgent* (someone needs to know or take action quickly), how are you going to ensure that the message is recognised as such? The first thing is not to confuse the two. Just because it's significant ('We have just won a big contract') doesn't mean it's urgent ('We have to

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[1] The words 'channel' and 'medium' are used here as being the same thing, which for our purposes they are

evacuate the building'), but they are easily confused. There may be some people who need to know about the contract now, but if it doesn't start for another year, why the urgency?

Evacuating the building will probably require an announcement (loud, so it's heard; low pitch to avoid sounding panicked; in clear simple language, so it is understood immediately). You don't need or want people asking questions, just to leave the building. Telling them about the big contract can wait till the next team briefing, when they can ask questions and explore the full implications. Of course, if it means the difference between the organisation surviving, it may acquire some urgency as well, which changes the situation. As you learnt right at the beginning, context is all.

Use your judgement

There are no simple rules that you can apply and decide on at the channel automatically, you just have to take into account the practicality (what's possible), the formality, the relationships, and the significance and urgency of the message, and balance them together. You already make these judgements by deciding to email or 'phone someone, but maybe not with a clearly structured approach. Now that you appreciate how different forms of communication work, you can make better informed decisions about which channel to use for which communication.

Appendix: Body language (non-verbal communication)

The term body language is frequently used when talking about non-verbal communication, and it does neatly sum up what we are talking about - a way of communicating (like a language) that uses our bodies rather than words. Like all languages, however, it can't always be understood by everyone. There are some elements that are common across the world, but others are very culturally specific.

For example, nodding the head usually means 'yes' or 'I agree' but in Greece, Macedonia, Albania and Bulgaria a single nod up (but not down) means 'no' or I don't agree. In Europe, crossing your legs usually means that you are relaxed and building rapport, especially if both parties copy each other (*mirroring* as it is called), but in the Middle East it is perilous, as showing someone the sole of your shoe is sign of disparagement and would be quite rude.

Tone of voice

If you have been abroad to a country where you don't know the language, how many times have you heard people speak and have known that they are telling another off, telling them a secret, flirting or simply giving directions? Without seeing them, you can tell from their tone of voice. We speak to children with a higher pitch, and men and women tend to use a higher pitch to each other than they do with someone of the same sex. When we get angry our pitch is lowered, and if we want to sound authoritative we also tend to use a lower pitch.

Speaking more softly or quietly suggests a shared secret or something that is important whereas raising your voice implies that you are being dominant - what you say is for anyone and the person you are talking too isn't particularly important. If we are reciting something we know well, we will tend to be more rhythmic, and will raise the pitch of the voice at the end of a question. (This latter phenomenon is particularly noticeable among Australians in normal speech, not just when asking questions, although it is becoming increasingly common amongst English speakers across the world.) These changes in the sound of our voice act as cues to the meaning of words, and we can use them to indicate that the words are being said ironically or that we doubt their veracity, even if the words themselves don't show that.

Facial expressions

People experience six basic emotions (*happy, sad, fearful, angry, surprised* and d*isgusted*), and we can show each of these emotions (and combinations of them) by the look on our faces. One of these emotions, happiness, is shown by smiling, and we are good at telling when someone is really smiling and when they are putting it on. Two groups of muscles, one controlling the corners of our mouth and the other the sides of our eyes are important, but we have no conscious control over these latter, so that a false smile only moves our mouths. We immediately recognise a false smile and will treat anything that is said as doubtful - if they are lying with their face they are probably lying with they voice!

We can use our eyes for other signals. We raise our eyebrows to suggest questioning, frown (narrow our eyes) to suggest doubt, stare without smiling to suggest aggression. Winking implies that we are conspiring together, shutting our eyes completely (especially when shaking our heads) implies complete disagreement. We can also purse our lips to suggest displeasure, sneer or flare our nostrils to show our disdain, or grimace (in different ways) to show fear or disgust. It is often by reading people's faces that we get feedback on our

messages, to see how the other person is reacting. Evolutionary scientists believe that our innate ability to recognise some facial expressions developed to ensure that we could survive, by recognising friends (who genuinely smile) from foes (who might snarl or stare).

An important part of our faces in conversation is our eyes. We expect to have a 'gentle' level of eye contact (ie not a piercing look or staring) with people we are talking to; with two or more we will scan them, making short periods of eye contact with each in turn. There are two specific groups for whom eye contact (and other forms of facial expression) have a very specific effect. For those who have poor or no eyesight, non-verbal communication of all kinds except tone of voice and emphasis has limited effect. However, people with sight problems often become finely attuned to the way others use their voices to compensate for this.

People with hearing loss, conversely, tend to focus strongly on the faces of speakers. This is not only those who can lip read, but many people with poor hearing, who use the way speakers move their lips and use their faces, to assist them in hearing more clearly. Be alert to people with sight or hearing loss and recognise the way that they behave, which may differ from those without such disabilities.

Gestures

We use our hands so often to aid our communication that we are often unaware of what we are doing. Have you ever seen someone giving directions over the 'phone? You will no they are doing it as they use their hands to show the directions, despite their listener not being able to see anything. This is one of the weaknesses of intermediated conversations - we are often only limited to our words and tone of voice; expressions and hand gestures can't be used and this can limit the effectiveness of the communication.

We hold our hand up in greeting, before holding it out to shake the other person's hand (or did, before the Corvid 19 pandemic!). We will wave our hands up and down, with the palms facing down to calm someone down, or point at them with short stabbing movements to emphasise a criticism of them. If we are trying to emphasise the size of something, we will hold our hands apart (especially if we're anglers!) or two fingers together to show how small it is. Many of these gestures are designed to act as metaphors for our words - pointing finger means 'I accuse you' or holding our hand up to show height. Gesture helps us to amplify meaning; being alert to their use (or non-use) can help you to make better sense of the words being used. Someone describing size without any hand gestures may well not have a good sense of its real dimensions, for example.

Posture

Posture is the extension of gesture to the whole body. Posture includes how we sit or stand, hold our arms or heads, including our direction of gaze. When we put our head back to suggest deep thought, we are using posture to tell others what we are doing. If you invite someone into your work space to talk, and remain standing throughout, you are sending out a very strong message that this will be a short conversation. Invite them to sit on a straight chair on the other side of the desk and you are saying this is formal, whereas sitting down side by side in soft, low chairs says this is informal and is aimed to build a strong rapport.

Leaning back suggest we are distancing ourselves from someone or what they have said; leaning forward that we are very interested (or hard of hearing - be careful not to make easy judgements). In a meeting you can often tell how others are feeling about a proposal by how they hold their bodies. If it is your proposal it is communicating to you who your allies are, who are the opponents and who is unswayed. Couple that with facial expressions (smiles or mouths twisted down) and gestures (heads nodding or shaking) and you can tell exactly what people are thinking.

Proximity

This is the last piece of our body language jigsaw - how close someone is to you. This is probably the most culturally varied; in some cultures people naturally stand closer or further way than in others, so the principles here are only guides. There are also differences between the sexes, with men and women tending to put greater distance between themselves and than men and men or women and women, unless they are in a relationship.

Research has suggested that there are four 'zones' of body space:

intimate	0 to 18 inches (0 - 0.45m) apart	This is inappropriate in a workplace setting unless you know someone personally and well, or are in a lift, but also if you want to confide in someone, when you would lower your voice and perhaps use your hand to hide your mouth from onlookers
personal-casual	1.5 to 4 feet (0.45 - 1.2m) apart	This is the body space for normal workplace conversation, but more senior people can abuse these social conventions, and come closer, invading your body space, to make you feel uncomfortable. This is sending a strong message about their power.
social-consultative	4 to 10 feet (1.2m - 3m) apart	This allows some conversation but is less personal and more public; to conduct a more private conversation at this distance, in private, is again asserting authority, but less confrontationally. Doing so in public can be demeaning, saying that your privacy doesn't matter.
public	over 10 feet (3m) apart	This is for general hearing, not at all specific to one person