

Language of Gesture

By Bala Prasad

Much has been said in this edition about effective communication, and universal languages. But in my opinion there is a universal non-verbal language that everybody understands. The language of touch for example – a slap on the face, without words, conveys anger and contempt in every culture. A hug, by contrast, a soft kiss, a gentle hand on the shoulder – this non-verbal communication tells the recipient, I love you, I understand you, I sympathize with you. And, regardless of the words we speak and the language in which we speak it, all of us, from the moment we are born, understand what it means to be held, kissed, and loved. Even my newest grandson, just nine months, prefers to sit next to me on the sofa, where he feels the warmth of my body, than by himself on the floor.

There is also the language of aroma – smelling fresh flowers, for example, or potpourri (a favorite of my wife), is going to brighten one's day much more than the smell of a skunk. An aroma can also communicate where we are – like at a gas station, or the ocean, or an Italian restaurant. And, in the case of my newest grandson, a smell may communicate when his diaper needs to be changed! Walking into a home filled with the aroma of baking bread will always be more inviting than walking into a home filled with the smell of new paint. This would be true in any culture.

And what about the language of basic human expression? Laughter is a universal expression of joy, just as tears are a universal expression of deep, deep sorrow. A smile, a frown, eyes open, eyes closed – every facial expression communicates how we feel at that given moment, regardless of what we say. Tone of voice is also a valuable – and universal – way to communicate. If you were to hear a father and son communicate in a different tongue, you would know instantly from their tone of voice whether the father was approving or disapproving of the child's behavior – even if you did not know what the father was saying. Tone of voice can also relay that you are bored, unimpressed, or skeptical, as well as that you are excited or enthusiastic.

Studies reveal that non-verbal communication conveys 93 percent of what you mean to say. In other words, when your expression says one thing and your words another, people believe the body language. We often show our attitudes through non-verbal expression. For example, body posture and walk tell us a lot about a person. Standing straight shows confidence. Slouching shows insecurity. It also shows disrespect – as if you don't care. Crossing your arms over your chest shows you have a

closed mind – that you are uninterested in the opinion of others. It can be viewed as a confrontational stance – as if you are telling the other person, “I don't believe a word you say.” It can also mean that you are protecting yourself. Arms at your side show openness. Walking is body posture in motion. Your walk should be different at home than at work. At work, you should walk quickly – like you are ready and eager to work. At home, your walk should be relaxed, maybe even slower. You should not be in a hurry.

In the business world, hand gestures and eye contact are essential forms of non-verbal communication. Nobody wants to do business with a person who has a flimsy handshake. It suggests weakness. Clammy hands might also make you question the person – why are they so sweaty? What makes them so nervous? As for eye contact, looking somebody squarely in the eye will instill trust and confidence even in the absence of words – just as avoiding eye contact with somebody may make you question their sincerity.

There are also body gestures that have universal meaning regardless of language or culture. Shrugging your shoulders tells people you don't know, or you don't care. Rolling your eyes is an even ruder way to convey your apathy without saying a word. Tapping a foot shows impatience. A hand on your hips shows frustration. Of course there are certain body gestures – like crossing oneself or folding one's hands in prayer – which are immediately recognized and understood in every culture.

So, the next time you are in a foreign country or surrounded by people who speak a different language, look for other ways to communicate with them – your handshake, your eye contact, your facial expression. Are you smiling? Do you appear nervous? Stand up straight, look the other person in the eye. If you look confident, people will believe you are confident – without ever speaking a word. However, none is so blind who refuses to see; none is so deaf who refuses to hear and none is so indifferent who refuses to understand these non-verbal languages.

Sincerely,

Bala Prasad