Chapter 5: Communicating Nonverbally

Chapter Summary

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in our interpersonal relationships. It is often ambiguous, meaning different things to people of different cultures and co-cultures. People use nonverbal cues to regulate conversation, such as using body language to facilitate turn-taking. Nonverbal communication is more credible than verbal communication because it is harder to mask. Sometimes, nonverbal and verbal communication are at odds, resulting in mixed messages.

Nonverbal communication manifests itself in many forms. Kinesics includes gestures and body posture/orientation. Physical appearance encompasses the physical characteristics of an individual (including attractiveness) and body artifacts such as clothing, jewelry, and tattoos. Facial expressions, especially the eyes and smiling, are the nonverbal cues that give the most insight into how someone is feeling.

Paralanguage, or vocalics, involves vocal qualities such as vocal distractors (the "ums" and "ers" of conversation), the use of silence, and pitch, rate, volume, inflection, tempo, and pronunciation. Paralanguage also encompasses vocal characterizers such as crying, laughing, whining, and so on. Touch communication, or haptics, the most primitive form of communication, represents the ultimate in privileged access to people, and can perform diverse functions.

Proxemics, the study of distance, involves people's personal space (which can vary by circumstance and culture) as well as their territoriality, or their need to "own" certain spaces. Aspects of the physical environment, such as color, lighting, and room design, can affect our nonverbal communication. And chronemics, or the study of a person's use of time, explains how people perceive and structure time, including how the management of time is associated with status and power.

Culture affects nonverbal behavior and interpretation of nonverbal behavior. People of different cultures vary in their mode of greeting and gesturing, how much they engage in eye contact, the personal space they require, and their acceptance of touching.

To improve our nonverbal communication, we must remember that verbal and nonverbal communication work together. We also need to avoid jumping to conclusions about what certain nonverbal cues mean. Furthermore, we need to monitor our nonverbal behavior and ask others for their impressions of our nonverbal cues. Finally, we must not only avoid nonverbal distractions during our conversations, but also ensure that we interpret nonverbal communication within its context.