

BODY LANGUAGE IS OF PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE IN LARGE GROUPS

By

Eugen Tarnow, Ph.D.

18-11 Radburn Road

Fair Lawn, NJ 07410

USA

E-mail: etarnow@avabiz.com

ABSTRACT

Meetings can be an effective tool for communication, unification and complex problem solving, but often deteriorate and become unproductive. In this note I apply scaling arguments to communication in meetings and suggest that as meetings get larger, it becomes more and more important to deal with the non-verbal messages. The potential for the meeting content to become less intellectual and more emotional in large groups is stressed.

At a social science conference the participants initially listened somewhat attentively to the various speakers. The seminar was held at relatively high intellectual and low emotional levels. At one point during the conference, however, one of the speakers started to deliver a paper that could be described as not "politically correct." The audience started to show their disapproval by taking up reading materials, others frowned and yet others started to look around to try to read each others' opinions. It seemed that the only way for the speaker to retain the attention would be with an emotional outburst.

Meetings can be an effective tool for communication, unification and complex problem solving, but often deteriorate and become unproductive. Reading newspapers, frowning and looking around are only some of the limitless ways participants can disregard and protest the verbal content. On the other hand, attentiveness can underscore the verbal content. In this note I apply scaling arguments to communication in meetings and suggest that as meetings get larger, it becomes more and more important to deal with the non-verbal messages. I also suggest how one can track and optimize the mix of verbal and non-verbal communication, simply by changing the seating arrangement.

Quantifying Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in a Meeting

While thoroughly defining and quantifying the modes of communication in a meeting is a near impossible task, we can make a very simple first approximation:

At any one time, each participant can emit verbal as well as non-verbal messages. A communication "channel" is open for non-verbal messages when a second person is watching the "emitter," and open for verbal messages when a second person is listening to the emitter. In a meeting of N members, we thus have, in principle, $N-1$ people watching or hearing the first person, $N-1$ people watching or hearing the second person, etc. The total number of channels open for verbal and non-verbal information is, in principle, the same:

Number of (non-verbal message channels) = #(verbal message channels) =N(N-1)

In practice, however, while a participant looking at the other participants may see all of them emit non-verbal messages at about the same time, he or she will likely not hear all participants speak at the same time: most people are not able to listen to more than one conversation at the same time and, in addition, meetings typically enforce a rule of one person speaking at a time. The number of verbal message channels available in a group at any one time thus becomes:

Number of (verbal information channels)= N-1

Accordingly, the ratio of non-verbal to verbal information channels open for communication is not one but:

Number of (non-verbal message channels) / Number of (verbal message channels) = N

and thus increases as the group becomes larger.ⁱ

Emotion and Reason in Meetings

Why might this result be important? Because once one type of communication channel starts to become much more prolific than another, WHAT gets communicated may also change. For example, emotion can be communicated both with non-verbal and verbal messages, while intellectual information is communicated chiefly verbally. Since the non-verbal message channels increases fastest with group size, emotion can get an easier passage while intellect may be forced to wait.ⁱⁱ

Of course, the division of our activities into emotion and intellect is not water tight, no more than the division of communication into verbal and non-verbal. Quantifying communication

by counting the open channels and relating the ratio to emotion and intellect is a first approximation, the validity of which will have to be determined by future studies.

Adjusting the Influence of Non-verbal Messages in Meetings

In general all of us would like a mix of verbal and non-verbal communication. In measured doses non-verbal communication can enhance trust and facilitate turn-taking; in excessive doses it can detract from the intellectual content. Finding a balance is the challenge for the meeting caller. Attention to this balance is particularly important in large groups. Here are some ways this balance can be adjusted:

First, allowing more member participation in the verbal discourse allows their "vote" to be stated rationally rather than through non-verbal communication. Second, one can overtly ask people to "lower the volume" of their non-verbal message. A person falling asleep in the first few minutes of the meeting can be woken up and a presenter who sees his audience looking inattentive and confused can overtly address the non-verbal language and translate it into words.

Third, different geometric arrangements of group members can be important as well. Sitting in chairs around a circle allows all participants to see all of each other and thus maximizes the potential for non-verbal communication. Placing a group around a table eliminates communication from the members' lower bodies. Arranging all the chairs into a square seminar configuration in which participants face one direction makes inter-member non-verbal messages even more difficult.ⁱⁱⁱ If you want to minimize non-verbal communication, you could ask participants to form a circle and face out from the circle (suggestion by Rafi Kleiman). This is a way to cool down an overheated discussion and move it to a more rational plane. The leader, of course, cannot face outwards because he or she needs to manage the turn-taking.

Fourth, conference calling and electronic mail are other tools to eliminate communication via non-verbal language.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The author, Eugen Tarnow, is a management consultant with a degree in physics (Ph.D. M.I.T., 1989). His interests include the performance of large and small work groups including cockpit crews and the effects of computerization on workplace communication patterns.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eugen Tarnow, 18-11 Radburn Road, Fair Lawn, NJ 07410; tarnow@avabiz.com (e-mail).

ⁱ As the balance of communication types in a meeting changes, the weight of each communication type must also be considered. As far as the author knows, there has been no experiments trying to determine the relative weighting of a verbal or a non-verbal communication channel. A simple and not unreasonable assumption is that each channel being used is counted as one vote.

ⁱⁱ There is some support in the literature for the potential dominance of emotion versus intellect in large groups. See, for example, Le Bon (1895), McDougall (1920), Freud (1921), as well as Sherif (1961), Asch (1956), Milgram (1974), and Janis (1972).

ⁱⁱⁱ Different groups require different considerations. For example, at seminars called "Dealers" at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center beanbag chairs are used. The relaxed postures are not distracting in this high performance environment. The social science seminar describe above had a somewhat unusual seating arrangement: participants were sitting around round tables allowing easier access to the non-verbal messages of all participants than had the seating been in conventional seminar style.