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*This paper addresses the importance of developing leadership skills in the encoding and decoding of nonverbal messages. It takes the position that impressions formed in superior-subordinate relationships are often determined by the nonverbal communication that occurs in face-to-face meetings. Based on social exchange principles, a situational view of considerate leadership behavior is developed where a superior attempts to make interaction less costly and aversive to subordinates by adapting to them non-verbally. A taxonomy of nonverbal displays of status, consisting of kinesic, proxemic, and temporal norms, is presented, which shows how supervisors often abuse the physical presence, personal territory, and time of their employees. It is suggested that superiors become more aware of these significant nonverbal messages.*

## **Developing Leadership Skills in Nonverbal Communication: A Situational Perspective**

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ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BECOME increasingly aware of the need for management training that includes the development of skills in effective face-to-face communication. In a recent survey of executives in 45 large industrial corporations Swenson found that face-to-face communication within the firm was considered the most important communication skill.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising in view of the fact that as much as 90 percent of a manager's time may be spent communicating, with speaking and listening comprising a much larger percentage than reading and writing. In a review of the literature in business communication Gieselman reported that:

... the focus of research interest often is not in accord with communication activities as they are observed and reported in today's organizations. A commonly accepted breakdown of communication activity has business and professional people spending their time as follows: writing, 9 percent; reading, 16 percent; speaking, 30 percent; and listening, 45 percent.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of face-to-face communication skills is reflected in workshops and seminars on such topics as listening, interviewing techniques, and group problem solving, which are quite common within many large business firms and governmental agencies.<sup>3</sup>

A topic of growing importance, which has gained considerable attention in recent years, is nonverbal communication.<sup>4</sup> Much of what is communicated in face-to-face encounters is not conveyed by the words that are spoken. In fact, it has been estimated that as much as 93 percent of an interpersonal attitude is communicated nonverbally.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when our words appear to contradict the feelings that are expressed in our faces, voices, and bodily movements, the perceived inconsistency tends to be resolved by trusting the nonverbal messages more than the verbal.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the demand for nonverbal communication training,<sup>7</sup> theories are needed so that nonverbal research findings can be applied to an organizational environment in a way that takes into account the relevance of key organizational variables. What is needed is a "situational" approach to nonverbal communication training so that recommendations can eventually become more context-bound than they have been to date. The purpose of this article is to develop a theoretical frame of reference that explains how nonverbal communication can be used to help manage the leadership impressions that are formed in face-to-face, superior-subordinate interactions over a period of time. More specifically, how can managers improve their leadership performance by more carefully monitoring the nonverbal messages they send to subordinates in face-to-face encounters?

### LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Tannenbaum has given us a useful way of viewing leadership as "interpersonal influence, exercised in situation and directed through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specific goal or goals."<sup>8</sup> Thus, interpersonal influence becomes dependent upon the communication skills of the manager, and leadership effectiveness can be viewed as a composite of interpersonal relationships. The interaction that occurs in each relationship can contribute to the success or failure of the manager's efforts to accomplish certain objectives.

Behavioral approaches to the study and practice of leadership in an organization focus on what individuals in positions of authority *do* rather than on the type of people they *are*. Interpersonal influence is the result of behaviors rather than traits. Most of this literature confirms the notion that the exercise of

leadership includes behavior which is intended to show some degree of respect for subordinates.<sup>9</sup> There is little doubt that, other things being equal, managers who show consideration toward their employees will be more successful than those who do not.

Managers who make the decision to act more considerately often make some attempt to involve their subordinates in the decision making process. Yet such efforts may prove to be ineffective in the long run if they are not consistent with the manager's behavior in face-to-face interpersonal encounters. It is here where the people-oriented skills of the manager are ultimately put to the test and where impressions are continuously shaped and reshaped.

When viewed as an "exchange of behavior" between a superior and a subordinate, it becomes possible to develop a conceptual definition of considerate leadership that clarifies how a manager can communicate respect for subordinates by *adapting* his or her behavior to theirs. Behavior that communicates regard for one subordinate may communicate disregard for another when the actions and apparent attitudes of the subordinates are ignored.

A social exchange view of leadership emphasizes the interactive nature of the leadership process. According to this view, a superior gains influence over subordinates by exchanging behavior in a trade that is regarded as "equitable" by the subordinates. A superior contributes knowledge and expertise in exchange for esteem satisfaction (status in the organization). Behaviors exchanged are both rewarding and costly to the interactants. The superior is expected to supervise effectively (cost) and in return is rewarded with increased status and esteem (benefit). Subordinates give up a measure of self-esteem in their deference to the superior (cost) and are rewarded with management expertise and supervision (benefit). The influence of the superior depends on his or her ability to keep the exchange in a reasonable state of balance or equilibrium. As Jacobs notes:

... Thus the group provides status and esteem satisfactions in exchange for unique contributions to goal attainment. Where these two benefits are in balance, a state of equity exists, and the superordinate is secure in his acceptance by the group. But when they are not in balance, as when the superordinate receives esteem satisfactions or demands status prerequisites which the group views as excessive in terms of the contribution he makes to the group in return, a state of disequilibrium may exist and the superordinate may lose influence

potential within the group—perhaps even his superordinate status if the group is free to depose him.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the superior's ability to keep the exchange in balance depends, in part, on the impressions that are created in face-to-face encounters. Each time a subordinate interacts with a superior face-to-face, the cost to the subordinate (esteem lost) and the benefit to the superior (esteem gained) is manifest in the status-oriented behaviors displayed by *both* on that occasion. Status-oriented behaviors refer to the whole range of culture bound actions that symbolize one individual's power to dominate another. Some behaviors tend to represent more power than others (making a decision is a more "powerful" behavior than leaning against a wall, though both behaviors are indicative of status in an organization) and are therefore perceived as more costly or rewarding.

Based on exchange principles, a useful way of conceptualizing considerate leadership behavior, while taking the face-to-face context into account, is: *Behavior that communicates high esteem or regard for subordinates by reducing the status discrepancy they perceive between themselves and their superior.* Since the superior occupies a more powerful position in the hierarchy, his or her behavior will generally be higher in status than the subordinate's. The *differential* in status-oriented behavior between the superior and the subordinate is a measure of how costly the interaction is to the subordinate (esteem lost) and consequently how rewarding it is to the superior (esteem gained). This conception is based on two assumptions:

1. That the status-oriented behaviors displayed by the superior and subordinate reflect the way they feel about themselves (a person who behaves in a high status manner feels more important).
2. That perceptions of self-esteem are relative (a person may feel more important interacting with a low status individual than with a high status individual).

Research findings tend to support the position taken here. Several studies have found that when "status differentials" (supervisory actions which call attention to the unequal status of the interacting parties) are imposed in a relationship between a superior and a subordinate, the superior tends to be viewed as less considerate.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in relationships where a subordinate's esteem cost appears to be excessive (as it is reflected in status differentials) a

considerate manager can communicate respect for the subordinate by taking actions that minimize the differential in status-oriented behaviors that exist between them. This is merely another way of saying that a considerate manager often makes some attempt to "treat" subordinates as though they were his or her equal (although the nature of the hierarchy makes this impossible).

In terms of exchange theory, the superior would be seen as more considerate to the extent that he or she is *given credit* for reducing the esteem cost incurred by subordinates. To briefly illustrate, consulting with subordinates so that they may become more involved in the decision making process increases the latter's self-esteem or sense of worth *because* it allows them to behave in a manner indicative of greater status. The superior is seen as more considerate to the extent that he or she is given credit for allowing or encouraging the subordinate to act in this way. Thus, consulting with subordinates has the effect of reducing the status discrepancy they perceive between themselves and their superior, which, in turn, reduces the psychological cost that characterizes their role as subordinates in the organization.

Behavioral displays of status, though less visible, are certainly no less important, in face-to-face superior-subordinate interactions. In the section that follows, considerate leadership behavior is discussed as an exchange in which nonverbal displays of status are traded for interpersonal influence.

## LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

When viewed from a "rules of conduct" perspective, much of the behavior observed in an organization can be explained as a product of organizational norms. Actions become both predictable and understandable when they are guided by the norms or rules of a social group. Such rules define the way an individual is obliged to act in the presence of others and the way others can be expected to act in return.

Even the most trivial of actions witnessed in an interpersonal encounter communicates something about the nature of that relationship when such actions are governed by rules of conduct. This occurs in the military where an enlisted man will salute an officer out of deference to his higher rank, or in a manufacturing

plant where an assembly line worker will sit down in his supervisor's office only when asked to do so by the supervisor. In both cases, *an image of one's self in relation to another is symbolized nonverbally by gesture and movement.*

According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, when the norms of a social group lead individuals to act similarly toward each other the relationships that result are said to be symmetrical. In contrast, an asymmetrical relationship exists when group norms lead members to act differently toward each other.<sup>12</sup> In most organizations those of unequal status (by virtue of their position in the hierarchy) will tend to establish asymmetrical relationships. The question now becomes, in what ways can they be expected to act differently toward each other nonverbally in face-to-face interactions?

There is a rather large body of scientific research which supports the belief that when superiors communicate with subordinates face-to-face, the unequal nature of the relationship is acted out nonverbally by the way the interactants use their bodies, the space around them, and the time available. The following taxonomy can be used to classify the ways in which superior status is communicated nonverbally in an organization:<sup>13</sup>

### I. KINESIC NORMS

- A. Relaxation
- B. Inattention

### II. PROXEMIC NORMS

- A. Protection
- B. Expansion
- C. Invasion

### III. TEMPORAL NORMS

- A. Frequency
- B. Punctuality
- C. Content
- D. Duration

## Kinesic Norms

Higher status appears to allow individuals to behave in a more relaxed and inattentive fashion than those of lower status. When interacting with subordinates it is not unusual for superiors to lean back in their chairs and look around the room while they

appear to be listening. Specific relaxation cues include: body lean, asymmetrical positioning of arms and legs, and relaxed speech (though the latter is not normally considered a “kinesic” behavior). Generally, higher status is associated with a more “easy going” demeanor. Inattention is ordinarily signalled by not facing or looking at the subordinate, particularly when the latter is talking. Unresponsive head and facial displays (e.g., not smiling at a joke or not nodding in agreement) also reflect a subtle lack of involvement. The implicit message which is communicated nonverbally is: “My body is more important than yours.”

### Proxemic Norms

Spatial behavior also differentiates superiors from subordinates. The territory of higher status individuals is generally less accessible than the territory of lower status persons. In our culture, superiors are afforded greater protection than subordinates; they are harder to get to. The environment tends to be structured in a way that insulates those of higher status against unwanted intrusions. In a university, a provost is more difficult to reach than a dean; a dean is harder to get to than a department chairman; and a department chairman is often less accessible than another faculty member.

In addition, higher status persons tend to use more space than those of lower status. Often, what they own is simply bigger and occupies more space. Big cars and big houses are still status symbols. When interacting with subordinates face-to-face, superiors take more liberties with the space around them; they feel more mobile. Their gestures are more expansive. They use up more acoustic space by speaking noticeably louder than their subordinates.

Invading the territory and personal space of others is a sign of status in an organization. It is a superior’s prerogative. Entering a superior’s office without permission is ill-advised. Since such an action would violate the unspoken norms of an organization, it would be regarded as highly inappropriate. This would not be the case however, if the subordinate’s office was similarly “invaded” by the superior. When communicating face-to-face, the interpersonal distance that is maintained during the interaction depends on who approaches who. If the subordinate approaches the superior, they will stand further apart than if the superior approaches the subordinate. This occurs because the subordinate

is more apprehensive about “getting too close” than the superior. The fact that higher status persons are less reluctant to invade the personal space of those lower in status is also evident in touch and gaze behavior. Superiors touch subordinates in social encounters considerably more than subordinates touch them. Subordinates are less likely to “stare” at their superiors (prolonged eye contact initiated and held by the subordinate would be an act of spatial invasion which is the superior’s prerogative) than the converse.

Proxemic norms in an organization enable superiors to, rather unobtrusively, send the message that: “My space is more important than yours.” The content of the message is unmistakable though a single word is never uttered.

### Temporal Norms

The implicit norms of an organization allow higher status persons to act in ways that control the time of others. More often than not, managers decide when they will meet with their subordinates. As a result, conversational frequency tends to be determined by the individual of higher status. After a meeting has been arranged, temporal control is exercised in a number of additional ways. First, the subordinate is required to be more punctual than the superior. Being late for an appointment is risky unless you’re the boss. Second, the superior is allowed to set the “agenda” for even the most casual conversations. The topic of conversation is typically controlled by the person of higher status. More time is spent talking about what is of interest to the boss than what concerns the subordinate; and the boss usually holds the floor longer. Finally, the amount of time conversing depends on the disposition of the boss. The decision to terminate or prolong conversational activity is usually made by the higher status individual. A manager might look at his or her watch and put a quick end to the discussion or might keep it going indefinitely.

Ultimately, temporal norms work to satisfy the needs of the superior at the expense of the subordinate. Our culture places a great deal of value on time; in an organization time is money. Superiors and subordinates interact in ways that reflect the former’s monopoly on time. Without speaking, the superior’s message is clear: “My time is more valuable than yours.”

### Leadership and Interpersonal Influence

Kinesic, proxemic, and temporal displays of status in an organization symbolize one individual's power to dominate another. The common denominator is the *implicit communication of disregard*; disregard for the physical presence, territory, and time of another. Though guided by the unspoken norms of an organization and operating largely out of awareness, such actions nevertheless call attention to the unequal nature of superior-subordinate interactions. By minimizing the extent to which they communicate status nonverbally in a given relationship, managers will be in a better position to pursue human relations-oriented objectives. They will acquire greater interpersonal influence by acting in a more considerate manner. This is especially true in cases where the differential in nonverbal displays of status between a superior and a subordinate serves no other function except to make the former "feel" more important than the latter.

From an "exchange" perspective it is easy to see how leadership performance suffers when nonverbal displays of status are needlessly employed and where "excessive" differentials in status between a superior and a subordinate are established and maintained. In such cases, interaction becomes very costly to the subordinate (esteem is lost when one feels inferior to another) and may be "too" costly when compared to the benefits received (supervision). If face-to-face encounters with a superior are perceived as aversive or threatening, the subordinate will be negatively reinforced to avoid interaction. The result is experienced by the organization as a loss of upward communication.

Whenever a subordinate interacts with a superior face-to-face, behavior is exchanged (often unknowingly) in a way that signals the superior's authority over the subordinate. Some loss of esteem to the subordinate is, of course, inevitable. But the loss may be excessive in relationships where the nonverbal behavior of the superior degrades the time, territory, or physical presence of his or her subordinate. Managers need to be aware of the behavior displayed in each relationship. Since subordinates also display some degree of status nonverbally, the "punitive" nature of the relationship will depend on the extent to which the manager employs *more* nonverbal displays of status than a given subordinate. The differential reflects the unequal nature of the relationship. The greater the differential (as perceived by the subordinate), the more degrading the relationship. Interaction

becomes more aversive and costly to the subordinate as the differential increases (signalling the subordinate's relative inferiority). The superior's nonverbal message becomes: "I am more important than you."

By adapting nonverbally to a given subordinate in face-to-face interactions it becomes possible for a manager to communicate respect for the time, territory, and presence of that subordinate. This, in turn, would decrease the esteem cost incurred by the subordinate which would probably result in the following outcomes:

1. The manager would be regarded as more considerate.
2. Interaction with the manager would be experienced as less aversive (less damage to the subordinate's ego). The subordinate's behavior relative to the superior would allow the subordinate to "feel" more important.
3. Upward communication would increase.

### DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Considerate leadership behavior has been conceptualized as actions which communicate esteem or regard for subordinates by reducing the status discrepancy they perceive between themselves and their superior. By paying attention to the status discrepancies displayed nonverbally in face-to-face encounters, managers can make more of an effort to behave in a considerate manner. This requires some basic skill in both the decoding and encoding of nonverbal messages.

Managers need to become aware of the nonverbal messages conveyed by their subordinates in face-to-face encounters. Consider the behavior of two hypothetical employees briefly described below:

*Employee A*—Seems very attentive; always looks at the manager either for approval or to show that he or she is listening. Nods in agreement frequently. Facial expressions are very responsive. Overall posture and movement is moderately tense. Gestures are constrictive and bodily position takes up little space. Often looks down and talks softly when speaking. Very careful not to stare and never touches the manager. Lets manager hold the floor and never interrupts. Usually discusses what the manager wants to. Spends much less time talking than the manager. Very punctual.

*Employee B*—Not very attentive; frequently looks around the room while listening. Facial expressions not responsive to the manager.

Overall posture and movement are very relaxed; speech is slow and relaxed. Gestures are expansive; moves around freely, taking up a lot of space. Often raises voice and occasionally stares in a threatening way. Head is erect when speaking; never lowered. Touches the manager at will and does not seem reluctant to stand very close. Holds the floor longer in conversation than the manager. Interrupts often. Occasionally late for appointments with the manager.

Employee A displays low status nonverbally while employee B displays high status. Interaction with the superior for employee A is likely to be more costly (esteem lost) than for employee B if the manager behaves similarly toward both. Assuming that the manager has correctly interpreted the employee's nonverbal cues as low and high in status respectively (decoding skill), an effort could be made by the manager to act in a way that would minimize the status discrepancy perceived by employee A (encoding skill). This would have the effect of esteeming the subordinate which would make interaction less costly. The manager could accomplish this by behaving in a lower status fashion (perhaps in ways similar to employee A).

The employee who displays high status poses a different problem. There is little need for the manager to make interaction less costly for employee B. In fact, in some cases interaction with an employee who behaves in a high status manner may be more costly to the manager than it is to the employee (particularly when the manager displays low status in a face-to-face encounter). Compliance may become a problem when subordinates begin to disregard the time, territory, or physical presence of their superior. Thus, it is sometimes more appropriate for a manager to increase rather than decrease the nonverbal displays of status employed in a face-to-face context (assertiveness training is helpful in this respect).

Nonverbal communication skills cannot be developed without regard for the context in which superiors and subordinates interact. The personalities, attitudes, values, and abilities of superiors and subordinates are also relevant concerns. For example, the approach suggested here may be limited, in part, by the following conditions:

1. Some managers may need the esteem satisfaction derived from acting in a high status manner. The maintenance of status differentials may be very rewarding.
2. Individuals differ widely in their ability to encode and decode nonverbal messages. Some managers will be much more difficult to instruct than others.

3. Sudden and dramatic changes in behavior may be viewed as insincere and manipulative by subordinates.

4. Status differentials may not be viewed as excessive or aversive if the manager is seen as a hard working, highly competent supervisor (subordinate's benefit). In such a case the "exchange" might be considered equitable.

5. Subordinates with certain values, or personality types, might expect or even demand that status differentials be maintained by the manager.

The difficulties involved in promoting alterations in face-to-face behavior cannot be overstated. Some resistance, for instance, will be based on the belief that much of our social behavior represents our "true" selves and therefore should not be tampered with. In addition, the long-term and frequent use of behaviors found in social interactions suggests a conditioning process (where such behavior has been reinforced) that would be difficult to affect.

## CONCLUSION

Much of a manager's job is spent communicating with others in a face-to-face context. There is little doubt that effective management requires good communication. Since attitudes and feelings toward others are communicated nonverbally, managers need to develop some skill in the encoding and decoding of nonverbal messages. Indeed, much of what a manager says may be contradicted by what he or she does.

The implicit norms in an organization lead managers to act in subtle ways that show little respect for the time, personal territory, and physical presence of their subordinates. When managers display considerably more status than their subordinates each time they interact, communication may become aversive and costly to the subordinates. Even managers with the best of intentions may be seen by their employees as inconsiderate if they consistently abuse their "right" to act in a high status fashion.

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