

Q&A: “When Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

Q

Dear Crucial Skills,

Can you address nonverbal communication and ways to control sending messages that you do not intend? I often get feedback that it is my tone of voice rather than my message that people are offended by and that my tone is negative and condescending. This is not my intent. How do I get a handle on it?

Misunderstood

A

Dear Misunderstood,

We've all heard the old adage that ninety percent of communication is nonverbal. While I'm not sure how one actually measures such a squishy thing, there is indeed truth in the notion that our words alone are not our only way of sending messages. Our facial expressions, volume, tone of voice, and body movements combine to send messages as well.

Not only do we communicate with more than words, we also tend to give more credence to others' nonverbal forms of communication. For instance, your sister opens a present you've just given her, frowns, pauses, puts on what appears to be a forced smile, and says robotically, "Thanks, it's exactly what I wanted." Then she tosses your present into her growing pile of bounty.

In your view, your sister's words of appreciation don't match her tone, delivery, and other body movements and you're betting this less-controlled (and possibly more-credible) nonverbal message of disappointment is the message you should believe. In your view, she told you a white lie to avoid hurting your feelings. You may be wrong, but when faced with what appear to be incongruent words and actions, we frequently come up with similar conclusions.

Now, back to you. If others tell you that you sound negative and condescending, it's possibly because your thoughts are negative and condescending. You might actually be thinking bad things about the other person and you can't hide your feelings well. Some people are actually quite adept at hiding these negative thoughts, putting on an upbeat face, and moving on without coming across as harsh or condescending. But most of us are not all that good at masking the emotions our stories create. We can only solve our problem by changing what we think about others. When we want to discuss issues professionally and calmly, we can't hold court in our head, find the other person guilty, and expect to act respectfully and cordially toward them.

We learned the simple truism that the body follows the heart when producing a training video some twenty years ago. We were directing a marvelous character actor who was supposed to deliver the line: "You agreed to have the write-up to me by noon. It's two o'clock. I've received nothing as of yet and I was wondering what happened." The idea behind the script was to simply describe a problem to a coworker and find out what was going on.

When our friend delivered the rather innocuous line to the other actor, he frowned and emphasized the words "AND I'VE RECEIVED NOTHING AS OF YET." His delivery came off as an accusation and not as a legitimate inquiry. When we asked him why he was so tough on his "coworker," he explained he didn't like being let down and the guy deserved harsh treatment. Now take note; he didn't change the line one bit, but his tone, expression, and nonverbal actions were aligned with his negative conclusion about the other actor. He thought the guy represented someone who was guilty and treated him as such.

So, for the second take, we told him neither to frown nor to emphasize "NOTHING AS OF YET." He smiled this time. He also leaned in—nose to nose—and spoke so slowly and deliberately that it came across as a threat. The other actor actually blinked nervously and backed up as if being attacked.

No matter how many times we told him to stop doing something nonverbal and threatening, he'd come up with a new nonverbal cue that implied "you're an untrustworthy moron" without changing a word from the original script.

Finally, in desperation we told him the other fellow was a good friend who was normally quite reliable and that he was curious as to why he had failed to deliver on his promise. When given this background he delivered the lines perfectly. His new feeling, based on new assumptions, led to new and congruent behavior. Ergo, if you want to repair your nonverbal behavior, alter the conclusion you've drawn before you say a word.

This, of course, is what we now teach in [*Crucial Conversations*](#). As part of the notion "work on me first," we suggest you inventory the conclusions you've drawn about others before you speak to them. If you think others are purposely causing you grief, you're likely to open your discussion with an accusatory comment. You might even choose tactful words, but your overall demeanor and tone will be accusatory if you've already held court and found the other person guilty.

So, when talking with someone who has let you down, start by asking yourself why a reasonable, rational, and decent person would do what he or she just did. Remain curious. Don't pass judgment before you've gathered all the facts. Then, set aside a time to talk in private. Start the conversation with the hint of a smile. You're not angry; you're curious. You don't feel superior; you simply want to surface and discuss the facts. In short, manage your nonverbal behavior by managing your conclusions. See if "fixing your heart" helps to fix your delivery.

Kerry