

Proxemics : A Brief Study of its Nuances and its Relevance in Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

Non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role in daily business communication activities. It is concerned with such things as body movements, voice, inflection, space, time, colour and layout of the environment. Though very often neglected, the study of the use of space or 'proxemics' is of immense significance as far as daily business communication is concerned. The space around us, the way we use it and its contents communicate a lot. They create meaning in our minds and in the minds of others as well. Effective use of proxemic communication can definitely help in the desired goals in business related activities. The paper attempts to study the nuances of proxemics and its relevance in business communication.

Keywords: Non-verbal communication, Proxemics, Space, Territoriality,

I. INTRODUCTION

'Communication', the buzz word in today's world, originates from the Latin word *communico* or *communicare* which means to share. The word has been defined variedly and used in many different contexts. Despite the different versions, it is commonly referred to as the transfer of ideas, feelings, plans, messages, or information through a common set of symbols. However, communication is considered effective only when it gets the desired action or result. The understanding created through one communication cycle can never be absolute or complete. It is an interactive and ongoing process in which common ground, that is, assumed mutual beliefs and mutual knowledge, is accumulated and updated [1].

Non-verbal communication refers to the communication that involves neither written nor spoken words but takes place without the use of words. It is less deliberate and conscious : rather it is subtle and instinctive compared to verbal communication. While commenting on the significance of non verbal communication in the evolution of human language, Harrison and Crouch suggest that "in the development of each human being, non verbal communication precedes and perhaps structures all subsequent communication" [2]. According to Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer in the field of understanding communications, 7% of the meaning is in the spoken words, 38% is in the use of the voice, tone and inflection, and 55% is conveyed through facial expressions [3]. So 93% of the meaning is in the non-verbal component of communication. Non-verbal communication can occur together with verbal communication and can occur alone as well. It is concerned with such things as body

movements, voice, inflection, space, time, colour and layout of the environment. It has been accordingly divided into various sub areas such as Kinesics, Proxemics, Chronemics, Paralanguage, etc.

Proxemics is a fascinating area in the world of non-verbal communication. The term 'proxemics' was coined by Edward T Hall who defined it as the spatial dimension of non-verbal behavior [4]. It created a revolution and gave a new dimension to the study of non-verbal communication. It is "personal space language", just as kinesics is body language [5]. Proxemics broadly refers to the study of the nature, degree and effect of the spatial separation individuals naturally maintain. It defines regions around people and the acceptable social behaviours in those zones. It assumes quite a significant role when communication is concerned in the business context. The paper attempts to study the nuances of proxemics and its relevance in everyday business communication.

II. DISCUSSION

The space around us, its contents and the way we use these convey a definite meaning. Of course, it takes some effort on our part to arrange them meaningfully, and on the part of others to understand and interpret the meaning. Our interaction with the people around us has a well defined and well understood spatial dimension. Conversely, the spatial dimension or distance between us and other people tells us something important about our relations and the nature of our communication with them.

Hall categorises the space that we use into three types – informal space, fixed space and semi-fixed space. He perceives the informal space as four concentric circles with the individual as the centre. The first space which is called the intimate space ranges from physical contact to 1.5 feet. Only special people, that is family members and closest friends enter this area. Personal space extends from 1.5 to 4 feet. Conversations with friends, colleagues and peers and the like occur in this space. Although personal in nature, it is a relaxed and casual place and permits spontaneous, unprogrammed communication. Extending beyond the second area is a third identifiable space zone, known as the social space, which begins at the 4-foot mark and continues for 8 feet more. We use this space formally, that relationships in it are more official. Most of the business communication activities are done in this area. Communication in this area is carried out with less emotion and more planning. The last area called the public space ranges from 12 feet to the farthest distance we can see. Communication that occurs here is more formal.

'Fixed space' includes fixed features like walls, buildings, wall sizes, places or corners for special purposes and so on. These features affect communication by marking out who interrelates with whom, how and for what purpose. In 'semi-fixed space' the physical features are, to some extent, changeable or likely to be rearranged. The furniture in a room can be arranged and rearranged for serving different purposes. For instance, the furniture arrangement in a room will be different for different purposes like an interview process, a board meeting, an informal meeting or a presentation. This flexibility in arrangement permits a variety of spaces that can be used to conduct different types of communication activities. The informal space, fixed space and semi-

fixed space together create a total space structure that communicates with us and determines the types of communication activities in which we engage.

Proxemics is also concerned with how groups use space. The way groups of people in an organization use space assigned to them determines their respective places and interaction patterns. For instance, people who sit at the ends of a large table are usually considered as leaders. Some people seated in a straight row at a table and the same people seated at a round table convey different contexts. So space patterns can be arranged to achieve specific results.

Harris and Sherblom suggest some ways in which seating arrangements can be used to facilitate communication between the members [6]

“Individuals sitting across a table from each other maximize their interpersonal distance, increase their potential for sending and receiving both verbal and nonverbal messages and thus perhaps conflicting messages, and increase the likelihood of becoming competitive. Sitting with a corner of the table between participants reduces interpersonal distance, focuses attention on the project and materials rather than on the individuals’ non verbal’s, and may help enhance the cooperativeness of the participants. Sitting side by side reduces the interpersonal distance still farther and, unless that interpersonal distance is too intimate to feel comfortable, may also be a cooperative seating arrangement” (118).

In business organizations, people use space and distance to communicate with others. The proximity they maintain in relation to others results from their territoriality. In fact, proxemic research is based on the concept of territoriality. Individual human behavior in an organization clearly reflects people’s consciousness of this. For instance, two employees, who are acquainted with each other, will not like to trespass each other’s personal space during lunch hour. The distance a subordinate maintains with a higher authority is definitely more than that he maintains with somebody of his own status. The size and type of space and the arrangement of furniture also depend on the position of the occupant. For instance, the higher the position, the more and better the space is and more protected the territory will be.

The use of space can help achieve or mar the objective with which a communication takes place. It is quite important that both the sender and receiver of the message in a communication process observe the distance conventions as demanded by the situation. For instance, being too near in a formal situation like an interview or a presentation can affect the speaker’s credibility. Individuals perceive distances for different messages and thereby form a personal space for interaction. They feel uncomfortable when this personal space is violated. So for an effective communication it is an essential requisite that their personal space is respected.

It is not just the verbal message that is affected by the handling of space, the substance of a conversation might also demand a special handling of space. Spatial changes give tone to a communication, accent it, and at times even counteract the spoken word [7]

An interesting research shows that gender affects proxemic behavior. Men and women interpret proximity in different ways. For example, women are likely to stand closer to each other as a way of attempting to create a

sense of closeness and intimacy. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to see close proximity as aggressive or confrontational. Similarly, men are more likely to associate physical contact with sexual intentions, while women use physical contact to communicate sympathy or friendship [8]. This of course can vary from one culture to the other.

III. CONCLUSION

Daily business communication activities are greatly affected by the proxemic behavior of individuals. People do create a personal space around them which they use differently for different purposes, and feel uncomfortable when this space gets violated. Improper proxemic behavior can adversely affect a communication process and the objective of sending the message is lost. On the other hand, a good knowledge of the nuances of proxemics can substantially enhance the effectiveness of a communication process. It, thus, becomes imperative for the contemporary business professionals to become aware of these nuances.

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