

KEEP AN EYE ON THE HAND

Non-verbal communication is part of a leader's arsenal

BY KENDALL ZOLLER

You are presenting to a group, running a meeting, or facilitating a discussion and you need to get the group's attention to move to a next step. Do you say, "Listen up!" or "Eyes up here!" or "May I have your attention please?" Overt management statements work often, but not all the time, and can even have a negative impact on an individual's learning.

Nonverbal or paralinguistic strategies respectfully get the group's attention. A good meeting is led by someone who not only carefully chooses words and contexts but also plans paralinguistics that support and enhance respectful group dynamics.

Paralinguistic is defined in two parts: para meaning "around" and linguistic meaning "words." Paralinguistic skills are the skills around the words we speak; they include how we use our voice, body, breathing, and eyes.

Patrick Miller (1981) says 82% of communication in the classroom is



nonverbal. A survey of the literature reveals that adult groups are not too much different. Recent research also indicates a connection between a speaker's gestures and listeners' mem-

ory (Goldin-Meadow, Kim, & Singer 1999; Roth, 2001). Using appropriate gestures and body language are vital to getting the message across — and having the group remember it.

The April 19, 2003, edition of *Science News* reported that a study by Emily Cross and Elizabeth Franz showed that "hand gestures amplify the impact of spoken words" (Bower, 2003). By attending to gestures, we can help improve listeners' access to

KENDALL ZOLLER is director of the CSUS Center for Mathematics and Science Education at California State University, Sacramento. You can contact him at 6000 J St., Sacramento, CA 95819-6125, (916) 278-5487, fax (916) 278-5084, e-mail: kzoller@csus.edu.

information. Michael Grinder (1993, 2000) proposes a model with four junctures at which to use paralinguistic skills in teaching: getting the group's attention, teaching, transitioning, and seatwork. Outside the classroom, when working with other educators, the categories could be:

- Getting their attention: when the leader needs the group's focus;
- Presenting: when the leader has information to impart;
- Transitioning: when the leader wants to start a group or individual activity;
- Doing the work: when the group works on a task or activity.

These four categories are dynamic, rather than occurring in a linear progression, during any meeting.

For getting attention, Grinder suggests pausing, voice modulation, a skill termed ABOVE (pause) whisper, and the frozen hand gesture.

The first skill, pausing, allows the speaker and listeners to breathe after the message is delivered, enhancing the delivery and acceptance of the message. Breathing supports understanding because although the brain is only about 2% of body mass, it uses as much as 37% of the body's oxygen. Pausing in delivery supports breathing and provides an environment low in threat, allowing the group to think more clearly and effectively (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Secondly, group leaders must be aware of voice modulation. Think of a voice modulation continuum, with one end labeled "credible" and the other end "approachable." Credible in the American culture and English language is represented by a flat voice tone that drops at the end of a sentence. For example, think of the following pattern spoken by newscaster Tom Brokaw: "This is Tom Brokaw, and this is the news." A voice and chin drop at the end of the sentence signal to listeners that information is going to be delivered and will be worth listening to. The approachable

voice is best understood as it contrasts with asking a question. The intonation rises at the end of a question. This signals to the group that the speaker is seeking information or being tentative in delivering the message (Grinder, 1997, p. 46). Speakers have their intention, and the group has its perception of the message's context on the continuum. Good speakers select the voice pattern that supports the intention of the words being delivered. Congruency of words and voice makes good oration.

The third skill is ABOVE (pause) whisper. The assumption here is that our brains are hardwired to detect pattern changes. For example, think about taking a long drive. While you are driving, you converse and think more about what you are saying than about driving. But a car turns in front of you or a dog runs across your lane and your attention shifts from talking to driving — a pattern change occurs. The disruption in pattern gets attention.

Groups have patterns, too. A group volume modulates up and down and can be influenced to increase or decrease in volume. To quiet a group using a nonverbal technique, introduce a pattern shift by saying a word louder than the loudest voice in the group. This loud noise is the first pattern shift. Then pause. Silence is the second pattern shift. Lastly, whisper the message in a stage voice, slowly bringing your voice to a normal speaking level. The whisper is the third pattern shift. When all three pattern shifts are completed, the group volume level is often lowered, and the speaker has gotten everyone's attention without ever saying, "May I have your attention please?"

A final strategy is the frozen hand gesture. This skill is best used during a pause. When a speaker holds the same hand gesture throughout a pause, it indicates to the group that more information is coming. It can also indicate that the next item is

more important than the previous item. Most people use this skill as a habit. However, using it consciously when delivering a plan draws attention to each point the speaker makes.

A good workshop or meeting depends on good presentation skills. Planning and incorporating a deliberate choreography of paralinguistic skills and developing a repertoire of skills to use on the fly can make a speaker more effective at getting the group's attention without overt management. Since nonverbal communication can account for 80% of the message, staff development leaders must consider paralinguistics to do their best work.

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