Five hundred and five respondents, from a wide variety of business organizations, were surveyed to gather information on their perceptions of nonverbal communication. Dividing the sample on the basis of perceived decoding ability and gender revealed several differences between the groups. Nonverbal communication was more important to self-rated good decoders than to other decoders. Better decoders relied most on facial expressions for accurate information while less skilled decoders preferred voice level or tone. Women, individually, rated themselves higher than men in decoding ability and, as a group, were perceived by both men and women to be better decoders and encoders of nonverbal cues. Women working in the education field rated themselves higher in decoding ability than any other group.

Recommendations for improved communication in businesses included paying more attention to nonverbal cues, especially the facial expressions, engaging in more eye contact, and probing for more information when verbal and nonverbal cues are discrepant. Managers should be aware that most employees feel frustration and distrust when receiving conflicting signals from their supervisors, and should try to modify their behavior by being more honest when communicating their emotions.

The Impact of Nonverbal Communication in Organizations: A Survey of Perceptions

Gerald H. Graham
The Wichita State University
Jeanne Unruh
National Institute for Management
Paul Jennings
The Wichita State University

The plethora of literature on nonverbal communication includes many studies of university students but few studies of persons in business organizations. Moreover, much of the literature is comprised of experimental data collected in contrived situations with role-playing as a major component. Very few studies have attempted to gain information about self-rated abilities to decode nonverbal cues.

Perceptions are important because they make up or influence our internal organization of data. Further, evidence suggests that a person's perceived ability to accurately decode nonverbal cues is positively associated with the person's actual decoding skills (Graham, Unruh, & Jennings, 1990; Zuckerman, DeFrank, Spiegel, & Larrance, 1982).

One of the major objectives of the study was to gather information on the perceptions of the respondents on the importance of nonverbal feedback and their ability to decode nonverbal cues from their co-workers and managers. The other major objective was to compare those findings with the existing body of knowledge on nonverbal communication and to
use these findings as a basis for recommendations on how to improve nonverbal communication in business organizations.

Ninety-four percent of the respondents in this study felt that nonverbal communication in the business world was either somewhat or very important. Some professionals might find this surprising. But, as Remland (1981) asserts, "There is little doubt that effective management requires good communication." Communicating well is known to be a critical success factor in such things as increasing productivity, improving employee satisfaction, and being recognized as an outstanding leader.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The large volume of research data on nonverbal communication can be, for the most part, categorized under several broad headings. These headings include studies underlining the importance of nonverbal communication, studies on encoding and decoding differences in relation to types of nonverbal cues, studies exploring very discrepant verbal/nonverbal cues, and studies investigating demographic (usually gender) effects on nonverbal communication.

Importance of Nonverbal Communication

In 1967, Mehrabian was one of the first to draw attention to the significance of nonverbal communication with his conclusion that nonverbal channels such as facial expression, body movement, and voice tone contribute 93 percent of the "attitudinal" message to the receiver. Subsequent research (Hegstrom, 1979) has shown that it is not the sum of the individual channels, but probably the blending of one channel with another that contributes most to the total impact of the message. However, Mehrabian's findings were so dramatic that they inspired many researchers to investigate the power of nonverbal communication.

Many of these studies came to the same conclusion as Honeycutt, Knapp, and Powers (1983): "The availability of nonverbal signals has an important bearing on accurate judgements of another's communication." For example, Woodall and Folger (1981) speculated that when nonverbal cues are not "in sync" with the rhythmic pattern of speech, decoders may question the honesty and motivation of the speaker. Addington (1971) also showed that decreases in vocal variations had a negative impact on source credibility.

Many studies that underscore the importance of nonverbal communication are focused on discrepant verbal/nonverbal cues. Burgoon,
Coker and Coker (1986) found that eye contact is important and that even in the case of a "positive" verbal message, gaze aversion led the receiver to perceive an overall negative message. Specifically, gaze aversion conveyed nonaffection, superficiality, lack of trust and non-receptivity.

Studies have also found that the effects of voice tone (especially negative voice tone) make a disproportionately stronger impact on decoders than verbal content (Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967; Bugental, Daswan, & Love, 1970). Other studies demonstrate that nonverbal behaviors can be used to predict truth or deceit in the sender (Mehrabian, 1971; Knapp, Hart, & Dennis, 1974; Ekman & Friesen, 1974; McClintock & Hunt, 1975; Feldman, Devin-Sheehan, & Allen, 1978; O'Hair, Cody, & McLaughlin, 1981). Apparently, deceitful communicators maintain less eye contact, talk less, offer fewer specifics, either make more or fewer body movements than usual, and either smile too much or too little.

In an experiment by Forbes and Jackson (1980) real job interviews were observed and the nonverbal behaviors in accepted candidates were compared to those in rejected candidates and candidates put on a reserve list. The accepted candidates engaged in more direct eye contact, more head movements, and more smiling than did the rejected or reserve candidates.

All of the studies discussed so far underscore the power of nonverbal communication and the influence it has on our interactions with others.

Types of Nonverbal Cues

Other studies are more focused on identifying which types of nonverbal cues are most accurate or informative. For example, considerable research has produced data supporting the notion that facial expressions are more influential and give more information than other nonverbal channels such as voice or body movements (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967; Zaidel & Mehrabian, 1969; Bugental, Daswan, & Love, 1970; DePaulo, Rosenthal, Eisenstat, Rogers, & Finkelstein, 1978; Rosenthal & DePaulo, 1979; Forbes & Jackson, 1980). Coker and Burgoon (1987) examined 59 types of nonverbal behaviors categorized into 21 groups. Five of the 21 emerged as significant predictors of degree of conversational involvement. At the top of the list was facial animation followed closely by vocal warmth and then vocal pitch and body movements. According to the cited studies facial characteristics seem to be the most accurate predictors of attitudes and feelings and, therefore, of the true meaning of the communication.
Extremely Discrepant Verbal/Nonverbal Cues

The data on very deceptive communication (when a person lies) tell a slightly different story. In DePaulo’s study (DePaulo, Rosenthal, Eisenstat, Rogers, & Finkelstein, 1978) when visual cues didn’t agree with audio cues, subjects were more influenced by visual than audio except in extremely discrepant cases where they attended more to the audio cues. Perhaps the best explanation for the perceived difference in extremely discrepant cases can be found in two studies done by Zuckerman (Zuckerman, Larrance, Spiegel, & Klorman, 1981; Zuckerman, Amidon, Bishop, & Pomerantz, 1982). Zuckerman discovered that facial cues can be either suppressed or exaggerated more easily than vocal cues. Therefore, when a person lies, true feelings are more likely to be revealed in the vocal channel than in the facial channel. The authors concluded that when there is extreme discrepancy between vocal and facial cues the decoder suspects the sender is lying and is, therefore, more influenced by the tone of voice which is more likely to reveal the truth than by the more controllable facial cues. However, in honest communication, facial cues gave more information.

Demographic Impact on Nonverbal Communication

Of all the demographic variables that have been investigated, gender seems to have the most impact on ability to decode or encode nonverbal cues. Women appear to be better than men at nonverbal communication (Hall, 1978; Isenhart, 1980; Blanck, Rosenthal, Snodgrass, Depaulo, & Zuckerman, 1981).

Hall (1978) surveyed 75 studies of gender’s impact on decoding nonverbal cues. She concluded that females have an advantage over men in decoding nonverbal communication and that this gender effect did not vary with the sex of the sender. In other words, women were better than men at decoding nonverbal cues from both male and female encoders. Hall also concluded that the age of the encoder or decoder made no difference. Females of all ages were better decoders than males of all ages. Not only are females better decoders, they appear to be better encoders as well (Buck, Miller, & Caul, 1974; Hall, 1978; LaFrance & Mayo, 1979; and Rosenthal & DePaulo, 1979).

Other ways males and females differ in nonverbal communication include the observation that females pay more attention to facial cues than males do. In fact, one study found that women showed less superiority in decoding nonverbal cues when heeding nonverbal channels other than the face (Rosenthal & DePaulo, 1979). The same study also
found that women were markedly more accurate in reading nondeceptive communication but less so when reading deceptive communication. There could be two explanations for this. One is that since the voice is more revealing than the face during deception, the voice may be a better source of accurate information than the face. Another possible explanation is that those who are too good at decoding of nonverbal communication that "leaks" the sender's true feelings are less effective in their interpersonal relationships.

The present study was an attempt to compare these literature findings with the perceptions of respondents in business organizations. Perceptions can influence behaviors and if the perceptions of the respondents parallel the measurements of actual skill and behavior found in experimental data, recommendations for improving nonverbal communication in the work place can be made.

**METHOD**

The researchers identified the top 50 employers in a midwest city as a possible sampling pool. The organizations were considered to be a representative mix of employment in the region with regard to technology, products/services offered, size, and industry. Managers in all 50 organizations were contacted and permission was obtained to survey departments in 35 of the organizations. Department size ranged from 5 to 33 employees. In the five largest organizations, 3-5 departments (totally unrelated to each other) were surveyed. Only 1-2 departments were surveyed in the remaining 30 organizations. The researchers trained a team of graduate students to distribute 1200 surveys to these organizations. Seventy-five percent of the surveys went to organizations with more than 1000 employees. The following industries were represented: manufacturing, health care, finance, retail, and government.

Five hundred and five usable surveys were retrieved yielding a return rate of 42 percent. Subjects were 217 males and 288 females. The majority of the sample (67%) was between the ages of 25 and 45. Seventy-seven percent had at least some college education. Seventy-one percent had at least 6 years full-time work experience. Seventy-nine percent had an annual income of less than forty thousand dollars. Four percent of the respondents categorized themselves as top level executives; 13 percent as middle managers; 29 percent as staff; 7 percent as first-line supervisors; 40 percent as employees; and 7 percent as "other."
Instrument

The survey was divided into two parts. Part 1 consisted of questions involving perceptions about the importance of, and the ability to decode nonverbal feedback from others on the job. Part 2 was comprised of questions designed to collect demographic information on the respondents. The questions in part 1 were developed by the authors and given to 10 managers and 30 employees as a pilot test. The questionnaire was then revised based on feedback from the pilot subjects during a verbal review session. Questions considered by the pilot subjects to be irrelevant or ambiguous were either deleted or reworked.

Six of the questions required answers on a Likert scale. An example of this type of question was: "When communicating with your immediate manager, how often do you feel that his or her feedback is in agreement with his or her nonverbal feedback?" Possible answers were: A. Always; B. Usually; C. Sometimes; D. Usually Not; E. Never. On two of the questions respondents were asked to rank order items. For example: "Certain types of feedback are perceived to more accurately reflect the true feelings of the sender than others. Rank the following from what you perceive to be the most accurate to the least accurate." Listed items were: A. Verbal Content; B. Voice Tone or Level; C. Hand or Arm Gestures; D. Facial Expressions; E. Posture or Stance; F. Head Movements. Other questions asked the subject to identify an answer as shown in this example: "When your supervisor's verbal communication to you is not in agreement with his or her nonverbal feedback, which communication do you perceive to be more accurate?" A. Verbal; B. Nonverbal; C. Unsure.

Means and standard deviations were tabulated for each question and frequency data were obtained for the sample as a whole. An analysis was conducted, using a correlation matrix, for identification of interrelationships among the data. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to pinpoint demographic and other variables which had a significant impact on the perceptions of the respondents.

RESULTS

Several variables had a significant impact on the outcome of this study, the two most important being perceived decoding ability, and gender. Differences in the sample based on decoding ability will be addressed first.
Decoding Ability

Respondents were asked to rate their decoding ability on a scale of one to five, one being very good, and five being very poor. Figure 1 shows that 9 percent rated themselves to be very good, 45 percent indicated above average, 43 percent indicated average, 2 percent below average, and 1 percent rated themselves as very poor decoders. For reporting and statistical purposes, the scale was collapsed into two groups which will be referred to as good decoders (grouping very good and above average) and average decoders (grouping average and lower ranks). Good and average decoders comprised 55 percent and 45 percent respectively.

Six aspects of communication were ranked in order of perceived accuracy in reflecting the true feelings and attitude of the sender, or encoder. Table 1 shows the rank order of the means for good and average decoders, where analysis of variance was used to determine the significance of the difference between the two decoding abilities. Those who felt themselves to be superior decoders ranked facial expressions as the most accurate followed by voice level and tone. Average decoders, on the other hand, ranked voice level and tone first and facial expressions second, switching the order of perceived accuracy. Both good and average decoders ranked verbal content of feedback at the same relative level of importance (3rd), but as noted by a significant difference in the means, good decoders believed it to be less accurate than did average decoders.
Relative to average decoders, good decoders relied more on the sender's body posture and stance.

When considering facial expressions, 79 percent of the respondents looked most closely at the eyes, followed by the mouth. Good and average decoders, alike, ranked eyes as the most important facial feature when reading facial expressions.

### Table 1
Rating of Communication Types According to Perceived Accuracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Mean (G)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Mean (A)</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facial Expressions</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Tone</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Content</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture or Stance</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand Gestures</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Movements</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Good decoders (G); Average decoders (A)

Pertaining to group conversations, such as committee meetings and department meetings, 92 percent agreed that nonverbal aspects were either important or very important. Overall, respondents perceived the nonverbal aspects to be more crucial in one-on-one settings than when in a group. On a rating scale of 1 to 4 (4 = very important, 1 = very unimportant), nonverbal importance on the job in a one-on-one setting, had a mean rating of 3.5. In a group conversation the mean dropped to 2.3. A difference in opinion existed between good and average decoders as to the importance of nonverbal aspects, both on the job and in a group: Good decoders rated the importance of nonverbal cues higher than did average decoders (note Table 2, variables 1 and 2).
2.2. Differences Based on Perceived Decoding Ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (G)</th>
<th>Mean (A)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Importance of NV communication in group discussion</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Importance of NV communication on the job (one on one)</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How frequently their managers presented discrepant V/NV cues?</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How frequently their managers were in V/NV agreement?</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is verbal or nonverbal channel more accurate?</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Which channel are future actions based on?</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Good decoders (G); Average decoders (A)
(variables 1 & 2) Scale range = 1 to 4, 1 = unimportant; 4 - important
(variables 3 & 4) Scale range = 1 to 4, 1 = never; 4 = frequently
(variables 5 & 6) Sale range = 1 to 3, 1 = verbal; 2 = equal; 3 = nonverbal

In the context of the superior subordinate dyad two issues were explored; first, how consistently a superior's verbal and nonverbal feedback were in agreement, and secondly, when the superior's verbal communication was not in agreement with the nonverbal feedback, which was perceived to be more accurate and which would have the greater influence on future interaction with that superior?

The consistency of superiors' communication channels was measured by asking how frequently respondents experienced confusion due to conflicting signals. The mean rating for the entire sample was 2.5 on a scale of 4 (frequently) to 1 (never). Good decoders experienced confusion more frequently than did average decoders. Correspondingly, average decoders believed their superiors' verbal and nonverbal feedback to be consistent more often than did good decoders. In other words, as decoding skill rose, detection of inconsistent communication also rose, leading to confusion as to the true meaning of the superiors' messages (see Table 2, variables 3 & 4).

Fifty-two percent of the respondents felt that when there was discrepant verbal/nonverbal communication from their supervisors, the nonverbal channel communicated more accurate information than the verbal channel. Twenty-one percent were not sure which channel would
be more accurate, and only 27 percent of the respondents perceived that the verbal channel gave more accurate information. Good decoders perceived the nonverbal channel to be more accurate than did average decoders. Similarly, given conflicting channels, respondents reported that the nonverbal channel of the message would have more influence on the subordinates’ future interaction with their superiors. There was a strong relationship (correlation coefficient of 0.67 significant at .0001) between the channel perceived more accurate and the channel that would influence future interactions more. For example, if the nonverbal channel was perceived to be more accurate, future interactions with the superior would be based on the nonverbal message (see Table 2, variables 5 & 6).

Ninety-four percent of the sample experienced negative emotions when the verbal and the nonverbal channels did not agree, (good and average decoders did not differ on this point. Specifically, 36 percent felt distrustful and 33 percent reported feeling irritated or frustrated.

Demographic Impact

Stepwise multiple regression was run to determine whether any combination of demographic variables could be used to identify a profile that would help predict perceived decoding ability. Seven variables were tested for their power in predicting decoding ability: gender, age, level of formal education, industry sector, years of work experience, position, and income. The optimal prediction equation contained two demographic variables, gender and the education industry sector (Table 3). That is to say, women and individuals who work in education consistently ranked their decoding ability significantly higher than did any other group of respondents. More specifically, women who worked in education perceived themselves higher in decoding ability than did any other group. Other demographic variables were not significant predictors.
### Table 3
Demographics of Good Decoders
(*Optimal Prediction Equation*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t-Statistic</th>
<th>t-Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>0.1298</td>
<td>2.100</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = male, 2 = female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Education</td>
<td>0.2374</td>
<td>2.030</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0 = other, 1 = education)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Constant</td>
<td>2.4010</td>
<td>23.729</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Significance: F = 4.596  
F-Probability = 0.0105  
Dependent variable = decoding ability  
1 = below average, 2 = average, 3 = above average, 4 = very good

Not only did women rate themselves more highly than did men, women rated women as better decoders and men agreed that women have greater nonverbal decoding ability (Figure 2). Fifty-seven percent of all respondents regarded women to be the most accurate decoders. Analysis of variance was used to determine if men and women differed in their perception of which gender was the better decoder. Although women were considered to be better decoders, women believed this to be true more than did men (F = 24.33, p = 0.0001). When asked which gender was easier to correctly decode, 48 percent said nonverbals from women were easier to decode than nonverbals from men. Furthermore, women felt more strongly than did men that women’s nonverbal cues were easier to decode (F = 7.676, p = .006).

Respondents in management or supervisory positions tended to be older males having higher educations, more years of work experience, and higher incomes. Managers believed that age improved decoding ability more than did employees and staff. As noted earlier, the age of the respondent was not found to have a significant impact in the way respondents rated their own decoding ability. In fact as the age of the respondent rose, the nonverbal channel was relied upon less in determining how they would interact with that person in the future. This was also the case with seniority. Individuals with more years of work experience tended to rely less on nonverbal cues and more on verbal content.
DISCUSSION

The results of this study were, for the most part, consistent with the literature. However, there were several surprising findings. As perceived decoding ability increased, the importance of nonverbal communication increased. Better decoders believed that they were more capable, than poorer decoders, of detecting when their supervisor's verbal and nonverbal communication were incongruent.

Perhaps people who considered themselves to be average decoders did not pay as much attention to nonverbal cues as people who rated themselves above average. This does not mean, however, that average decoders were less emotionally affected when confronted with obviously discrepant cues. Indeed, they reported that they were just as frustrated and distrustful as the better decoders.

Almost half (43%) of the respondents rated themselves average in decoding ability, and another 3 percent rated themselves below average. Since effective communication is critical to success, consider that more than 45 percent of those surveyed claim that they are either frequently or occasionally confused by inconsistent verbal and nonverbal cues from their supervisors. In addition, more than 94 percent of the entire sample felt frustrated or distrustful when confronted with discrepant verbal/nonverbal communications. It should follow that organizational productivity cannot be optimal with the current amount of miscommunication and frustration generated by verbal/nonverbal discrepancy. The authors surmise that both morale and productivity could be significantly im-
proved if employees and managers were better informed about nonverbal communication and if they felt more confident of their encoding and decoding skills.

Since evidence supports the proposition that actual encoding and decoding ability is positively correlated with perceived encoding and decoding ability (Graham, Unruh, & Jennings, 1990; Zuckerman, DeFrank, Spiegel, & Larrance, 1982) and since the current study identified several perceived problems related to nonverbal communication skills in a business setting, the authors offer the following recommendations.

Decoding Skills

In this study, the major difference between self-rated good and average decoders was how the two groups ranked types of nonverbal communication. Good decoders felt that facial expressions gave the most accurate information about the true meaning of the message while average and below decoders relied more on voice level or tone. This finding is consistent with the large body of literature that reports the face as the best provider of accurate nonverbal communication.

Assuming that respondents who perceive themselves as better decoders are more accurate, the data suggests that those who wish to improve their nonverbal decoding skills could do so by paying more attention to nonverbal cues and concentrating mainly on facial expressions. This means engaging in increased eye contact, since this study and many others have shown that eye contact is, by far, the most important facial characteristic in nonverbal communication.

Self-rated better decoders also tended to rely on nonverbal cues more than on verbal cues when communicating with a person in the future. Reliance upon nonverbal cues makes good sense since nonverbal communication has been shown (in the review of literature) to more accurately reflect the true feelings of the encoder. Decoding nonverbal cues successfully is not an end unto itself. Employees or managers who decode nonverbal cues accurately but fail to act on the information can face the same consequences—e.g., negative emotions or faulty decision making—as those who are unsuccessful at decoding nonverbal cues. Most importantly, instead of ignoring nonverbal communication, one should gently probe for more information when faced with discrepant verbal/nonverbal cues.
Encoding Skills

Supervisors and managers should take special note: More than 50 percent of the respondents felt their supervisors' verbal and nonverbal communication was occasionally or frequently in conflict. As Remland (1981) pointed out, "Much of what a manager says may be contradicted by what he or she does." Keeping in mind that such discrepancy can cause miscommunication, distrust, and frustration managers should become more cognizant of this problem and make real efforts to keep their verbal and nonverbal communication consistent with each other.

Unfortunately, many managers have felt that they must not show their emotions to their subordinates. When angry or upset they may try to hide or disguise their feelings. But, what they are really doing is sending a mass of conflicting signals which confuse employees and erode trust. The authors recommend a more honest approach. Numerous studies imply that people who don't overreact, but who appropriately frown, smile, maintain eye contact, and use proper voice inflections come across as more caring, trustworthy, and honest. They are also much more likely to communicate what they intend to communicate (Mehrabian & Wiener, 1967; Burgental et al., 1970; Feldman et al., 1978; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Garrison, 1984). This appears to be especially applicable to managers.

Gender Differences

Gender was the other main variable which impacted the results of this study. Women rated themselves higher in decoding ability than men rated themselves. And, interestingly, both men and women, as a whole, reported that women are not only better decoders, but also better encoders of nonverbal cues. These data are consistent with the literature (Hall, 1978).

A study by Rosenthal and DePaulo (1979) found, by observation, that women pay significantly more attention to the face than do men. The current study showed no difference between men and women in this respect. This is an interesting discrepancy and one which merits some speculation. This study has clearly shown that those who rated themselves high in decoding ability favored facial cues over any other nonverbal cues. Since experimental evidence also consistently shows that the face is the best source of accurate information, it may be that many men are laboring under the impression that they do pay enough attention to facial cues and that they do maintain sufficient eye contact, when, in fact, they do not.
Predicting Nonverbal Skills

In the authors' attempt to identify a demographic profile which could predict self-rated decoding ability, two variables were found that fit the equation. The highest individual predictor was, interestingly, occupation in education. Respondents working in the education industry were likely to rate their decoding skills very highly. The second highest individual predictor was gender. When combined with education, these two variables provide even more information. Women who work in the education field rated their decoding ability higher than any other group. Adding in more variables reduced the predictability of the equation and did not contribute to the overall information.

These findings seem reasonable. Evidence indicates women are better than men at nonverbal communication. Women in the teaching profession would seem, logically, to have an even greater advantage because of the nature of the occupation. Teaching demands an intense communication effort—probably more so than any other profession.

Perception Differences in Managers and Employees

The authors predicted differences between the perceptions of employees and those of managers. However, only one difference emerged. Those in management believed that decoding ability improves with increasing age. Respondents who held management positions tended to be older than those respondents who were employees. Older respondents, however, did not judge themselves to be better decoders than younger respondents. Furthermore, some studies have shown that older decoders (sixties and older) are less skilled at decoding nonverbal cues than younger persons (Parham & Feldman, 1981).

SUMMARY

In summary, the results of this study showed that the perceptions of 505 respondents in the business world agree fairly well with the experimental evidence reported in the literature. Nonverbal communication was important to all surveyed, and most respondents agreed that nonverbal communication would influence their interactions with people more than would verbal content. Better decoders relied most on facial expressions for accurate information while less skilled decoders preferred voice level or tone.

Females, individually, rated themselves higher than men in decoding ability, and as a group were perceived by both men and women to be both better decoders and encoders of nonverbal cues. Women working in the
education field rated themselves higher in decoding ability than other group.

Recommendations for improving nonverbal skills included paying more attention to nonverbal cues, especially the facial expressions, engaging in more eye contact, and probing for more information when verbal and nonverbal cues are discrepant. Managers should be aware that most employees feel frustration and distrust when receiving conflicting signals from their supervisors, and should try to modify their behavior by being more honest in communicating their emotions.

REFERENCES


Accepted by NLR, 5/14/90
Copyright of Journal of Business Communication is the property of Association for Business Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.