

Sending the Right Message: Understanding Overt and Covert Communication

Even though we are not always aware of it, you are constantly sending messages to the people around you through your body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and sometimes even through your lack of response to other people's messages.

By learning about the many ways that people get their messages across, you will learn how to keep your own communications in check and send the messages that you intend to.

Here are a few tips to get you pointed in the right direction:

Overt Messages

- As often as possible, consider the words you're using. Make sure that they reflect the message you intended. When you're upset about a personal matter, for example, and a co-worker asks what's wrong, the cranky response "Nothing!" will suggest to the co-worker that you are upset with him or her. This is probably not the message that you meant to send.
- Recognize that body language and voice tone can drastically change the meaning of words you use. Think, for example, of all the different ways you can say "That's just great!" It can be used to convey sarcasm, irony, pleasure and even displeasure, depending how it is said.
- Use of the words "I" and "you" can change the way people respond to similar phrases. For example, "You didn't do what I asked you to do!" will receive a different response than, "I'm afraid this hasn't been done the way I intended."

Covert Messages

- Even when you are not talking, your body is sending messages. To take an extreme example, if you glare at your boss, you won't need to use words to communicate that you are unhappy with your job and don't see yourself as having a future with the company.
- Similarly, if you sit slumped in your chair when the boss is talking, you send a message that you are not interested, or are even resentful.
- If you are upset over a personal matter and spend the morning frowning while you work, you will send a message that you don't like what you are doing or are unable to cope with the work.
- Body language can reveal feelings that you are trying to hide. The words "I am not angry," will carry no credibility if your fists are clenched.
- Become aware of the messages you are sending throughout the day.

Effective Body Language

- Lean forward a little in your chair to show interest when someone is talking to you.
- Nod to acknowledge the speaker's points.
- Smile appropriately to demonstrate involvement or understanding in what they are saying.
- Use hand gestures to demonstrate commitment and lively interest when you speak.
- Look people in the eyes to establish trust and open communication.

Sending Messages Through Choices You Make

- When you go into a meeting and sit close to the front, you suggest that you are interested in the purpose of the meeting.
- Conversely, if you lean on a wall at the back and continually eye the door, you send the message that you wish you were somewhere else.
- Avoiding your company's social events can suggest that you are not really part of the team and are not truly committed.
- Arriving at work early each day, even if only by fifteen minutes, sends a message that you are committed to your job and enthusiastic about starting each day.

- Think about the messages you may be sending with every choice you make.

Remember that words make up only about 20 per cent of what you communicate. By becoming aware of the other communication channels that people use to send messages, and using those to your best advantage, the world of possibilities opens up.

Everyone sends mixed messages, or messages they don't mean to send, from time to time. But by being aware of these aspects of human communication, you will become able to say what you mean, build stronger working relationships and get where you want to be.