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Newsletter

Communicating Better: Four Social Signals

Successful people are great communicators who recognize that conversations are part of an evolving social process. They aren't just skilled listeners; they're attuned to subtle social signals that are more revealing than words alone – and they use them to their advantage.

We're more connected than ever before. The ability to reach out and communicate with people around the globe has never been more accessible. But are we paying attention to key signals that improve our understanding?

Ten years ago, half of humanity had never made a phone call, and only 20 percent had regular access to communications. Today, 70 percent can place a phone call or send a text message. Almost every stratum of society is now connected.

But if we look at unproductive meetings, failed sales pitches, fruitless negotiations and emails that spark firestorms, it's easy to see that we're not always skilled communicators. Despite technological advances in communication, our ability to detect social context has deteriorated.

Fifty years of research reveals that words play only a small role in conveying meaning. Facial and other nonverbal expressions are larger contributors. And over the last decade, scientists have found that social signals are a significant, yet largely unexplored, communication channel.

Social Channels

Social communication channels profoundly influence our major decisions, even though we're usually unaware of them. These signals are produced unconsciously, so they're supremely honest. As Alex Pentland of MIT's Human Dynamics Lab explains in his book, *Honest Signals: How They Shape Our World*:

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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Proffitt Management Solutions
326 Maddock St.
West Palm Beach, FL
www.ProffittManagement.com
561-582-6060
info@proffittmanagement.com

Honest Signals comes from a new and emerging science, called network science, that tries to understand people in the context of their social networks rather than viewing them as isolated individuals... Recent advances in wireless communications and digital sensors have made it now possible to observe natural, everyday human behavior at a level of detail that was previously unattainable.

Measuring Social Signals

We unconsciously communicate with one another. Even before we utter a word, we intuit how others feel.

Researchers are now using sensing technology (*sociometers*) to detect key signaling behaviors – including activity levels, mimicry, synchrony, pace and physical distance – in face-to-face conversations.

Pentland and his MIT colleagues developed the sociometer, which was further perfected by Ben Waber and fellow MIT alumni who founded Sociometric Solutions. The device is worn around the neck like an ID badge, and it captures tone of voice, activity level and location. While it does not record actual words, it can detect and/or measure:

- Who you talk to, how often and for how long
- Whether two speakers are face to face or turned away from each other
- An interaction's energy level
- Levels of engagement

We may not perceive these social signals unless we're looking for them. When we do become aware of them, they provide a very effective window into people's intentions, goals and values. Using the sociometer, scientists can accurately predict the outcomes of social situations, job interviews and even salary negotiations.

Effective communicators are more sensitive to social signals, using them to more fully understand social context and influence. They pay careful attention to signal patterns within their social networks, harvesting individual members' knowledge and capturing the "wisdom of the crowd" to improve performance, decision-making and project management.

Four Key Social Signals

"If we watch the give-and-take of conversational turn-taking and gesturing, and carefully measure the timing, energy, and variability of the interaction, we can find several examples of honest signals." ~ Alex Pentland

Pentland's research reveals four key honest signals that can be effectively measured: influence, mimicry, activity and consistency.

Influence

How can we detect how much influence we're having in a conversation?

Answering this question can help us negotiate a salary, make a sales pitch or score a promotion.

Influence is particularly important for leaders charged with persuading others. It's an indicator of dominance. Studies of negotiations confirm that the person who holds the floor has an advantage (to a point).

Controlling the pace of a conversation allows us to influence its outcome. We can speed or slow our speech, varying the pace by milliseconds. We can create or eliminate gaps in conversation. These tiny time variations are perceived by others' conscious minds only indirectly (as intuitions). Our conversation partners can tell that we're insistent, highly attentive and invested in directing the flow of conversation.

Can you remember a time when you were called on the carpet by an angry supervisor? The boss likely raised his voice, rapidly fired questions at you and demanded explanations, yet cut you off before you could finish speaking. You felt pushed and pinned down by the barrage of words. The boss, clearly dominating the interaction, used these "verbal pushing" techniques to control – and influence the outcome of – the conversation.

Sales pitches and other attempts to persuade others are more moderate examples of influence. Variations in verbal pace are so fleeting that they're imperceptible through conscious processing. We intuit that the other person is insistent, paying keen attention and interested.

We use our influence to assess others' attitudes and interest level. In one study of 46 salary negotiations, researchers found that those who controlled conversation patterns were perceived as the influential parties.

Mimicry

We mirror our conversation partners automatically and unconsciously. The mirror neurons in our brains hardwire us to copy smiles, interjections, head nodding, and vocal timing and pitch. Some of us mimic more than others. Salespeople are often trained to use mimicry as a tactic, but customers can usually tell

when this wholly natural tendency is exaggerated or faked.

Mirroring behaviors increase the degree to which conversational partners like and trust each other. Unconscious and authentic mimicry is a sign of empathy that can actually improve negotiation results by 20 to 30 percent.

No other factor in financial interactions proves to be as effective.

Activity

The amount of energy we invest in a conversation signals our interest and attention. Excitement is therefore an honest signal.

Yet even when we try to be smooth and subdued, outward signs of nervous activity will emerge. We fidget, talk quickly and gesture when we're sincerely interested in a topic and the conversation's potential outcome.

When two people are exploring the possibility of a relationship, they signal interest in each other with rising activity levels.

For example, when observing speed-daters, social scientists can accurately predict which women will provide their phone numbers, based solely on activity levels during these brief encounters. The same applies to other social interactions and business networking.

Whenever two people gesture and talk energetically, the odds are very good that they'll trade contact information to further their relationship. Conversation partners seem to know this intuitively and can sense when to follow up.

How can we apply this in business? If you've ever had a conversation that lacked energy, you know there's a problem.

Solve it by finding a topic that interests the other person. Ask questions that give you insights into what your conversation partner values. You'll further the relationship when you raise your partner's activity level.

Consistency

Consistency refers to the variability of your speech and movements during a conversation.

When you're focused, your speech and movements are smooth and regular. When you experience

multiple simultaneous thoughts or emotions, your speech becomes jerky, unevenly accented and paced. Consistency is a measure of mental focus, while greater variability may signal an openness to influence from others.

If you have to process thoughts, you hesitate and have to slow down. But when you're sure and convinced, you speak with smooth confidence and without variability.

Researchers have found that consistency in emphasis yields better results in salary negotiations and business pitches.

But consistent emphasis is not always a good thing. While it indicates focus and determination, it's the opposite of what you want as a listener or helper.

Variability and pace signal your openness to others' contributions, while consistency indicates you've made up your mind.

Better Leadership Communication

Successful people and effective leaders do more than just listen. They recognize that observing patterns of unconscious social signaling offers a window into a group's dynamics. They can detect when a group is moving toward problems like groupthink or polarization.

Language and arguments matter, of course, but sometimes they matter surprisingly little. We're not as rational as we'd like to believe. If you're not reading the social signals, you may be missing out on important information.

Our conscious and unconscious communication channels are likely to be enmeshed and intertwined. The successful communicator can pick up and elaborate on interaction patterns and help groups function more effectively.

Unfortunately, we tend to over-rely on digital exchanges, but memos and emails are no match for face-to-face contact. Most of us recognize this fact. Perhaps video technology will overcome some of technology's inherent problems.

Always remember that communication is socially situated. The more we recognize that discussions are not limited to words and part of a larger social dialogue, the more successfully we'll work together.



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**326 Maddock St.
West Palm Beach, FL 33405
561-582-6060**