



The Secrets and Science of Body Language

What veiled signals are people sending you?
Understanding nonverbal communication is crucial to your success.

By Terrence Fernsler

The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work

By Carol Kinsey Goman. Softcover. 210 pages.
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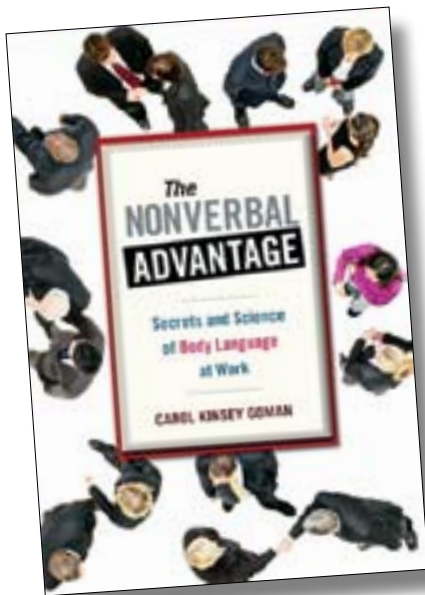
When people talk in person (or via video), much—even most—of the communication is nonverbal. And yet few of us have taken time to master this vital part of communicating.

For most of us, nonverbal communication is intuitive. But how do we know our intuition is correct? In this brisk, illuminating book, Carol Kinsey Goman explains when our intuition is accurate and when it could be amiss.

Five factors help us interpret what's behind people's words:

1. Context: It's important to view nonverbal communication in light of the circumstances. When people cross their arms, for example, it usually means they're resisting what's being discussed. But this pose can lose its meaning if the room is cold.

2. Clusters: Consider nonverbal cues in clusters: Overall behavior is more telling than a single gesture.



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3. Congruence: When people's gestures contradict their words (they say "yes" while subtly shaking their head, for instance, or frown when they say they're "fine"), believe the body language, not the words they speak.

4. Consistency: Deviations from a person's normal body language can be very revealing.

5. Culture: Not only can gestures mean conflicting things in different cultures but people from various regions of the same country may have quite different body language: Just consider the contrast between the fast-paced, quick-talking New Yorker and the Southerner.

Goman, a coach and therapist, clarifies the meanings of gestures from head to toe, exploring the power of eye contact, the importance of the handshake, the meaning behind facial expressions, and what arm gestures indicate. She devotes a chapter to feet and leg placement, which exert a surprisingly strong influence on our intuition about someone.

Much of Goman's book examines body language in terms of reading it in others. However, she also tells us how to make favorable impressions when meeting people and how to be more confident. Body language can rarely be used to manipulate or fool people. Instead, learning about body language can help us enhance candor and caring in ourselves. We can't fake sincerity (at least not for long), but once we learn to present ourselves a certain way through our body language, we unconsciously become that way.

Goman can help us master the skill of reading body language, not only by explaining it to us but also through the exercises she presents to put our new skills into practice. Being able to understand eye, facial, and body gestures with conviction can be a key to professional success. ■

Terrence Fernsler has been a nonprofit professional for nearly 30 years.