

Research Summary

Subject

Subject:

- “93% of your communication is non-verbal” is an urban myth

Citation:

- Lapakko, David. (2015). Communication is 93% Nonverbal: An Urban Legend Proliferates. *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal*. 34. 10.56816/2471-0032.1000.

Other studies referenced in this summary:

- Lapakko, D. (1997). Three cheers for language: A closer examination of a widely cited study of nonverbal communication. *Communication Education*, 46(1), 63–67.
- Mehrabian, A., & Weiner, M. (1967). *Decoding of inconsistent communications*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 6, 109-114.

Introduction

Background:

- The often-cited formula that 7% of your communication is verbal, 38% is vocal and 55% of your communication is facial is misinformation and the equivalent of an urban legend.
- It was originally put forward in a study in 1967 (Mehrabian & Weiner, 1967).
- The researcher leading that original 1967 study, Albert Mehrabian, has explicitly stated that his research has been misquoted and that “it is absurd to imply or suggest that the verbal portion of all communication constitutes only 7% of the message.” (Mehrabian, 1995, as cited in Lapakko, 1997, p. 65).
- The Mehrabian research is only applicable to interpreting the affect or emotional state of others and cannot be generalized to communication in general. It *only* refers to the “emotional meaning” of communication.

Research question:

- The research question “is to determine how far and in what ways this urban legend has spread, and to consider what lessons we should take away from this situation” (Lapakko, 1997, p. 8).

Hypothesis (if applicable):

- Not applicable

Methodology

- In January of 2007, the researcher used Google to search for the keywords “communication 93 percent nonverbal”. The search resulted in 263,000 hits. Of the first one hundred, duplicate sites, ones that do not reference the source study or the 7-38-55 formula, or were inaccessible due to subscription requirements were all eliminated. The remaining 79 relevant sites were then subjected to the content analysis.

Results / Discussion

Findings:

- Only four of the 79 sites questioned the 7-38-55 formula with the remaining 75 sharing it as an accepted fact without any qualification.
- Of the 79 sites reviewed, only one correctly indicated the 7-38-55 formula only refers to the “emotional meaning” within communication. The remaining 78 incorrectly generalized that formula and presented it as applicable to overall communication, the effectiveness of a communication, and the total impact of a message.

Conclusions:

- We “have to be concerned when so-called ‘experts’ repeatedly chant that communication is 93% nonverbal”. (Lapakko, 1997, p. 13)
- “As educators in the field, one thing that we can certainly do is contact people who use the 7-38-55 formula and treat it as the gospel. We need to let them know that they are in error.” (Lapakko, 1997, p. 13)

Limitations:

- Only Google was used, did not look at the wider number of sources on communication, and was based only searching for references to the 7-38-55 formula.

Commentary by Trustmakers

This urban myth continues to be shared to this day. We hear it from performance coaches, “experts” in non-verbal communication, consultants, advertisers, and others with vested interests.

The 7-38-55 formula is simply not true when it comes to communication. If you want to know what was the emotional content of a single word said in different ways to 37 female psychology majors in 1967, then this is your formula. Otherwise, when you share this formula as applicable to communication in general you are factually incorrect.

The widespread sharing of this misinformation, its ready acceptance by those who want it to be true, and the lack of critical thinking are all evident in this case.

It has been our experience that the impact of body language and tone is blown way out of proportion. People who are overmanaging their non-verbal mannerisms and focusing on them at the expense of their content, run the real risk of losing authenticity, credibility, and trust. When you are speaking or presenting, audiences respond to people who are clear and authentic, not those who are putting on an artificial performance. For example, getting rid of “ums” from your verbal communication takes a lot of mental effort in the moment, comes at the expense of focusing on more important aspects such as your actual content, and gives you nothing when it comes to the clarity of your ideas and the audience's understanding of them.

We encourage people to not fuss about non-verbals. Sure, if they are so extreme that they actually interfere with your communication, which is rare, then manage them down a little. But don't obsess about things people don't notice or if they do notice they don't care. Especially with modern audiences, you will connect much better with your audience if you are clear and yourself. Don't let a performance coach choreograph you. *You* are the expert in communicating authentically as yourself, so focus on your content and communicating your ideas clearly.