

## **For Immediate Release**

### **Effective non-verbal communication critical in crisis situations**

The use of the wrong facial expression or gesture during a crisis media interview or stakeholder engagement can irreparably damage the ability of the company or organisation to garner public support, understanding and believability, all of which are critical for the effective management of a crisis.

“In many media training exercises and courses, more emphasis is placed on strategies and tactics to manage interviews, handle difficult questions and communicate company messaging than on non-verbal communication,” says Evan Bloom, MD of the Crisis Communications Consultancy. “What most people forget is that the media encounter or interview actually starts when the journalist sees the organisation’s spokesperson for the first time, even before the interview kicks off.”

In its most simple form, non-verbal communication refers to communication via all means other than the spoken word. It communicates before a spokesperson opens their mouth by setting the agenda and enhances what is said. “Effectively used, non-verbal communication can also determine the believability of a spokesperson. Used incorrectly, it can contradict what a person is saying, sink their credibility and destroy the potential of the company or organisation to manage the crisis at hand,” adds Bloom.

Problems do creep into the multicultural dynamics of South Africa. “In the western boardroom, maintaining eye contact is critical and using a firm handshake denotes strength of character and an ‘I mean business’ attitude,” says Bloom. “However, in certain cultures in South Africa, not maintaining eye contact and using a limp hand shake is used to transmit a message of respect, yet it can be interpreted as disrespectful.”

Non-verbal communication is made up of at least eight components. “These components must consciously be integrated into the overall communications process to ensure the spokesperson attains a near perfect communication encounter. All are used during face-to-face interviews, while, obviously not all can be used in telephonic interviews,” continues Bloom.

The eight components are:

#### **1. Facial expression**

Facial expression must mirror verbal comment to carry the believability of a point being made or of an interview being held. If an executive is being interviewed on allegations of corporate governance transgressions and he/she has a cunning smile on their face, this will detract from the believability of their messaging.

## **2. Gestures**

The use of inappropriate gestures can also derail an interview. It is not appropriate for an executive to wave their hands wildly or bang their fists on a desk in an interview. Executives who do so can come across as aggressively defensive and can be viewed as having something to hide. The executive would need to simply clasp their hands together comfortably and answer all relevant questions asked by the journalist.

## **3. Paralinguistic**

This is the tone of voice and its loudness, inflection and pitch. Speaking very softly detracts from believability and while it can be put down to nervousness of the spokesperson, it can also be seen as having something to hide. Spokespeople are advised to use a strong and confident tone of voice to drive a point home.

## **4. Body language and posture**

The position of a spokesperson's body in relation to the journalist or interviewer is crucial. Facing an interviewer with arms and legs uncrossed shows an open attitude. If an executive's arms and legs are crossed then this can be interpreted as closed and defensive. During TV interviews, executives must be cautioned against swinging on their chairs. Not only does this irritate the interviewer and viewers at home, it also transmits an 'I can not wait to get out of here' message.

## **5. Proxemics**

Proxemics is the personal space between people. In South Africa, different cultures have different views on space. Some cultures have bigger personal space requirements than others. In a communications setting, the space used between a spokesperson and a journalist in a one-on-one setting will differ to a round table interview or a press conference.

## **6. Eye contact**

Out of all the non-verbal communication components, eye contact can be categorised as one of the most important. How a spokesperson makes eye contact says a lot. A lack of eye contact shows distrust, fear and dishonesty. Direct eye contact shows openness and a willingness to engage. However, maintaining eye contact and then narrowing the eyes can show anger, aggression and disbelief.

## **7. Haptics**

Haptics refers to how people communicate through touch. As has been mentioned, a firm handshake shows steadfastness and strength of character, although some cultures in South Africa use a limp handshake as a sign of respect.

## **8. Appearance**

Spokespeople need to realise that what they wear and what they look like starts communicating before they open their mouth. Dark suits with a good shirt and tie, often referred to as power dressing, carry more believability than light coloured suits and no tie. Obviously there are

exceptions, one can not expect a business owner at the scene of his/her factory burning down at 3am to look ready for a boardroom photo call. Female executives would be cautioned against wearing skirts or blouses that are too revealing.

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