
Silent Messages

By Lothar Katz

Here's a little experiment for you to try out:

- Step 1 – Get into an elevator with a stranger of the same gender.
- Step 2 – Look the person in the eye. Don't smile. Don't say a word.
- Step 3 – If the other person starts talking to you, don't respond.

As they say, results may vary. They actually depend a lot on *where* you're conducting the experiment. For instance, step 3 is unlikely to happen in Finland; there, you'll probably ride the elevator in complete silence, whether you made eye contact or not. In France, the other person may not necessarily talk to you, even when you made eye contact. Otherwise, the person may turn away and look annoyed when you fail to respond. In the United States, with the possible exception of New York City, I'd say the experiment was pretty successful if you made it out of the elevator alive.

Just kidding. I sincerely hope you will get out completely unharmed. However, the person you shared the elevator with may now think that you're a complete jerk. That's because you stepped over a major line: you remained silent in a situation where it is *not ok* to remain silent. American culture has little tolerance for silence in what I call "silence-averse" situations. Especially in the south of the country, the rule seems to be that whenever you get within ten or so feet of another person, you're supposed to talk to him or her. If you made eye contact, it's mandatory. Otherwise, your counterpart will conclude that you are either ill-meaning or very ill-mannered. In situations where humans expect to communicate with each other, the absence of such communication inevitably conveys a negative message in the United States.

That's not necessarily the same elsewhere. For one, members of other cultures may consider fewer situations "silence-averse." In addition, they may interpret silence differently. Across cultural groups, it can actually have many meanings:

- ***Silence may indicate disinterest or rejection.*** This is common in most Western cultures. Remaining silent in "silence-averse" situations is the non-verbal equivalent of saying "I don't like this," albeit less confrontationally. Members of all cultures are at least familiar with this concept. How likely people are to assume that another person's silence conveys this particular message depends to no small degree on their cultural background. In general, Americans tend to be quicker in jumping to this conclusion than others.
- ***Silence may indicate anger and hostile feelings.*** This is a kind of escalation from the previous point. Westerners often combine it with other non-verbal clues, such as staring at their counterparts, pressing the lips together, and/or folding the arms. In contrast, Arabs and some Asians may be smiling while using silence to convey the same message. Used to not showing feelings openly, they leave it to their counterparts to figure out that there is indeed a major issue.
- ***Silence may indicate embarrassment.*** Especially in strongly group-oriented cultures, such as most Asian and Arab countries, "unpleasant" comments and situations

often lead to moments of silence. When Westerners may feel compelled to speak up, such as when someone makes an embarrassing mistake, others might choose to remain silent in order to avoid making the person “look bad.”

- ***Silence may indicate agreement.*** An unspoken rule in some cultures, especially in certain European ones as well as in parts of the United States and Canada, is that “you need to speak up if you disagree with what is being said.” Accordingly, a person making a proposal may assume that those listening agree with it if they remain silent.
- ***Silence may not indicate anything unusual.*** Most cultures know many different situations in interpersonal communication where silence is perfectly acceptable. People may welcome it as an opportunity for reflection and preparation. In fact, members of some cultures consider it polite to remain silent for an extended time before responding to another person, especially one of higher rank and status.

These interpretations tell us that silence can actually carry different messages: it may mean that things are good, that things are pretty bad, that things are *really* bad, or it may actually not mean anything. Here’s the challenge, then: how are we supposed to deal with this when communicating with people from other countries and cultures? Most of us have witnessed situations where erroneous assumptions lured presenters into thinking that their audience agreed with them, misled negotiators into making costly mistakes, or even caused previously strong relationships to become tense and shaky.

The way to avoid all of these misunderstandings is this: instead of jumping to conclusions, verify your assumptions. If your counterparts remain silent in a situation where you would not expect them to, assess what may be going on by carefully asking open questions. If this sounds simple, that’s because it is. More often than not, you may actually find that there is no issue when you thought there was one and vice versa. And who knows, maybe you’ll even discover that others are *not* the jerks you thought they were!

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.