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Sizing up what's really being said

Seminar for Intel workers and spouses focuses on nonverbal cues to aid communication

By Rachel Osterman
BEE STAFF WRITER

Sure, you shouldn't look distracted when you talk to your boss. But your spouse?

"Not a good idea" was the message sent to Intel employees - and their spouses - during a recent evening seminar.

Speaking to several hundred gathered in an auditorium on the

INSIDE

Want tips on some of the small stuff you could be working on at work that will help your communication with colleagues?

► **Page D4** The Human Resources column reports that flexible schedules and flex-time jobs can be just as popular with men as with women.

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Insight Education Systems. "The subtle and invisible things we do are far more powerful."

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company's Folsom campus, motivational speaker Stephen Young said when it comes to communicating, it's the small stuff that matters. The subtle glances, the roll of the eyes, the tone of the voice.

They matter for workplace relations, where teamwork is anchored around respect and trust. And also at home, he advised.

"Words represent just a small part of what's really being said," said Young, senior partner of New Jersey-based

Insight Education Systems. "The subtle and invisible things we do are far more powerful."

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Intel: Workplace skills advocated for home use

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sis on getting along. But as more companies are teaching their workers how to communicate effectively on the job, they're also including lessons about how to employ those skills outside the office, said Joni Johnston, a clinical psychologist and head of WorkRelationships, an employee relations consulting company based in Del Mar.

"You're seeing a lot more employers include messages about the link between home life and work life," she said. "But it's rare to actually include family members in those kinds of sessions."

Of the 55 companies that use Young's firm for communications seminars, Intel is one of only three that invite in employees' family members.

Young says he's trying to give people the ability to articulate the difference between spoken and unspoken messages.

He likes to preach the impact, at home or at work, of so-called "micro-inequities," those negative nonverbal messages we often inadvertently send out, like a frosty tone of voice, and "micro-advantages," the positive ones, like an understanding head nod.

The former, he says, are cumulative, repeated behaviors that devalue, discourage and impair performance in the workplace. The latter can spark creativity, leadership and exceptional performance.

And they apply equally at home as at work.

So, for example, if a wife apologizes to her husband with an "OK, fine, I'm sorry," the husband likely will infer that she's really not apologizing. And if the wife replies, "But I said I'm sorry," the husband can again assume that her so-called apology was actually issued with an altogether different message.

Above all, Young says, be aware of the subtle cues you send. You don't want to inadvertently give your spouse or co-worker the wrong message.

Jim Brown, director of customer service at ComPsych Corp., a Chicago-based workplace consultant firm, says that although people spend their

NINE WAYS TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

1. Solicit opinions

Asking "I'd like your opinion about..." sends the message that you value other perspectives.

2. Connect personally

Take the time to engage in nonbusiness conversations with colleagues. It indicates you're interested in them as people.

3. Ask questions

When you have a negative reaction to a colleague's statement or suggestion, lead with a question, not a statement.

4. Attribute/credit ideas

Acknowledge the "owner" of an idea in meetings. Avoid using "he," "she" or "the idea" when referring to a comment - use the individual's name.

5. Monitor facial expressions

Be conscious of your facial expressions while listening to a colleague.

6. Encourage participation

When addressing a group, send messages that encourage participation from everyone, such as making routine eye contact.

7. Monitor personal greetings

In group settings, be sensitive how you greet those with whom you share a close relationship.

8. Respond constructively

When responding to a comment you disagree with, show that you understand their perspective before offering a different view.

9. Handle interruptions

When someone is speaking, acknowledge interruptions but politely return focus to the original speaker.

Source: www.insighteducationsystems.com

whole lives communicating, they don't always pick up on the subtleties of conversing.

"We don't always interpret conversations correctly," he said.

And for companies, there's a dollar-and-cents motivation: When co-workers communicate better, Brown said, "Ultimately, the business benefits as a result."

Tom Thompson, an Intel help desk manager, attended an employee-only workshop by

Young last year.

He said the session made him understand why it's frustrating when a co-worker plays on a laptop or answers a cell phone during a conversation. "It sends the message that what you're saying isn't important," he said.

That evening, on his way home from work with his wife, Holly (also an Intel employee), Thompson asked how her day went. He then proceeded to play with the radio dial and adjust the car mirrors, while she answered.

"I go, 'What are you doing? I can't talk to you!'" Holly Thompson recalled.

"It's a micro-inequity!" he shot back.

Holly Thompson's interest was piqued. Interested in getting "more awareness" about the everyday messages she sends, she signed up for Intel's family session.

Afterward, the couple decided to make some communications adjustments at home.

No. 1: When Tom reads newspapers and Holly tries to talk to him, he needs to put down the paper and really listen.

No. 2: When Holly is trying to zip through the chores on her to-do list and Tom is trying to get her attention, she needs to stop, sit down and listen. "I can't just be like, 'Uh-huh, OK, uh-huh,'" Holly explained.

Intel employee Ernie Felix also attended a micro-messaging presentation several months ago.

Paying attention to subtle cues came in handy later when attending a conference in Philadelphia. Several Intel employees were discussing where to go for dinner. After Italian food was suggested, one person said, "Sure, that's fine."

But, recalled Felix, the person's face said, "Oh, my god, not Italian food again!"

Keying into the negative facial expression, Felix asked the offended party for a different suggestion. The group eventually settled on Cuban cuisine, he said, and "had a great time."

That's what Young would call a "micro-advantage" in action.

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The Bee's Rachel Osterman can be reached at (916) 321-1052 or rosterman@sacbee.com.