



Gargle Before Your Phone Call

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Have you heard the old adage that people can see a smile over the telephone? I am not talking about Skype, I'm talking about the attitude we project through our tone of voice and choice of words on the phone.

I take the subject of body language very seriously and have been studying it for a couple decades. My second book was on the topic of body language when we write electronic notes such as e-mail or texting. I believe there's a form of body language in all forms of communication, and we need to be aware of subtle signals that are being sent whenever we're interfacing with another person in any mode of communication.

The other day, I had an important business phone call that I was making from my home office, and I found myself changing into a more upscale business attire and brushing my teeth and gargling before making the call. It seems really odd to get prepared as if we were going to be meeting someone face to face just to have a phone call. I think what happens when we take the time and energy to be presentable physically, even though the person cannot see or smell us, we approach the conversation with a slightly different point of view or attitude that can be interpreted on a subliminal level.

Since I work out of my home office on many days, it would be easy to just keep my informal appearance when making calls, and I have to admit most times I do that. For a call with a new acquaintance or call that has really important implications for a business deal, I often find myself sprucing up my appearance just so that I get that extra edge and more professional feeling. I believe that diligence somehow projects into my tone of voice.

Of course, I cannot see through the phone lines to identify if the other party has his hair combed, but I am probably picking up some information about his feelings about himself and his appearance as we are chatting. It is an interesting study, and I don't know if anyone has done an organized research study on this aspect of communication. Clearly, we can discern if a person is mildly upset, proud, depressed, anxious, joyful, or

any other mood by listening to the words and tone of voice. Shouldn't we also be able to tell how the person is feeling about his own physical appearance?

I suspect the accuracy of reading this kind of vicarious body language is not nearly as high as when we can actually see the other person. Obviously, there are far more visual cues that are available for reading emotions, so it becomes a real challenge to listen with enough depth to pick up a thread of attitude that the other person may be trying to hide from us. With a lot of practice in fact-to-face communication, we may be able to pick up several visual cues from a person's body language and be right most of the time (like maybe 85% of the time). We probably would never get that good at reading body language over the phone, but it is likely we could do better than random chance (like maybe 65%).

The next time you are on the phone with someone, try to guess more about what is going on with the other person than just the words that are being used. I believe the ability to read remote body language is a learned skill. We need to continually be alert to signals, and if we catch a thread of incongruency between the words and the body language, we can probe a little deeper to find out if our guess is correct.

By being alert for these subtle signals and testing the validity when possible, we have the ability to sharpen our skill at reading remote body language over the phone. Conversely, if we prepare ourselves mentally and physically before an important phone call, we will usually project a more professional image and communicate our ideas with greater clarity.



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