Managing Extreme Evaluation Anxiety Though Nonverbal Communication

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"Many evaluative situations cause people to fear that they will be found to be deficient or inadequate by others…" (Donaldson, Gooler, & Scriven, 2002, p. 261). Donaldson, et al. (2002) use the acronym XEA to describe excessive anxiety and explain that "…there are people who are very upset by, and sometimes rendered virtually dysfunctional by, any prospect of evaluation, or who attack the evaluation without regards to how well conceived it might be" (ibid). A common technique or 'magic bullet' to prevent excessive anxiety would not exist in program evaluation.

In his EVAL 600 class (Western Michigan University, October 26, 2004), Scriven stated that evaluators should care about excessive evaluation anxiety for two reasons. First, if XEA can be quelled, getting information from participants should be more fruitful. Thus, evaluators should strive to make evaluates less fearful of the evaluation process. Secondly, the likelihood of implementing recommendations should be increased if impactees of the evaluation are comfortable with the evaluation process.

The use of communication research may be a unique approach to relieving XEA, one aspect being nonverbal communication. How can evaluators through unspoken messages impact stakeholders?

> A gaze broken too soon, a forced smile, a flat voice, an unreturned phone call, a conversation conducted across the barrier of an executive desk—together such nonverbal strands form the fabric of

our communicative world, defining our interpersonal relationships, declaring our personal identities, revealing our emotions, governing the flow of our social encounters, and reinforcing our attempts to influence others (Ebesu & Burgoon, 1996, p. 346).

In an instant, a stakeholder will make an impression regarding the professional evaluator. This impression will be based on a number of nonverbal cues; eye contact, voice pitch and speed, dress, posture, and facial expression. Credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise are often determined through nonverbal communication channels (Ebesu & Burgoon, 1996; Self, 1996).

Eye contact. Averting eyes, shifting eyes, looking at notes for an extended period of time, and blinking excessively all signal untrustworthiness, insecurity, and/or lack of credibility (Burgoon, Coker, & Coker, 1986; Fatt, 1999; Nolen, 1995). If an evaluator greets a stakeholder with a calm, consistent gaze, they are conveying confidence and believability.

Paralanguage. Paralanguage, or vocal cues, include such factors as volume, rate, pitch and pronunciation (Fatt, 1999). At times, vocal cues are more important than words (Nolen, 1995).

Gestures. Gestures like smiling with head nodding, open arms, casually crossed legs, and leaning towards the person of focus (Nolen, 1995) all convey comfort and confidence. Alternately, such gestures as negative head nodding and foot movement in space signify a tense environment (Keiser & Altman, 1976).

Appearance. Nolen (1995) states, that the objective of communication may determine the choice of clothing. For example, if the evaluator wants to

imply receptiveness of others, he/she should mimic the dress of those being evaluated. "Similarity implies receptiveness" (Nolen, 1995). If the evaluator wishes to promote an image of status and expertise (ibid), they should dress more formally than those they are evaluating.

Environmental factors. An environmental factor such as seating arrangement says a lot about the evaluator and their intentions. "A person expecting to exercise leadership typically sits at the head of a table…" (Ebesu & Burgoon, 1996, p. 350). However, close proximity, or face-to-face, communication leads often the most fruitful communication (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984; Fatt, 1999).

In summary, the evaluator can use the above nonverbal cues to exhibit dominance or cultural similarity; closedness or openness. While nonverbal cues occur almost automatically (Palmer & Simmons, 1995), we must try to be cognizant of them. For a more in-depth understanding, it would be wise and worthwhile for every evaluator to take a graduate level course in nonverbal communication to better understand the person and attitude they are portraying and how their communication cues may affect XEA.

My vision for evaluation concerns communicative style. I would like to see evaluators become conscious of the nonverbal messages they are sending to stakeholders and peers. It is through an evaluator's communicative style that the image of evaluation will be formed. If evaluators are to reduce anxiety and gain a helpful reputation (Donaldson, 2001) they must approach their stakeholders with friendliness, sociability, and ease.

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