

# Let's Dump the 55%, 38%, 7% Rule\*

By Herb Oestreich, Professor Emeritus Human Resource Management, College of Business, San Jose State University, California, USA.

## Words ARE Important

Imagine for a moment you are sitting at the negotiating table with Slobodan Milosevic, discussing the future of Kosovo. You say in the most soothing tone of voice and the most charming smile on your face that your country favors independence for Kosovo. It's no accident. You said "independence," not "autonomy." In the vocabulary of any diplomat that means you want Kosovo to be a country separate from Yugoslavia. The impact of that single word "independence" is devastating, no matter what tone of voice, facial expression or gestures you used when you said it. You have just closed the door to further negotiations on the subject. Yet that silly little "55%, 38%, 7% Rule" that so many of us, including myself, have been peddling in our communications training, would suggest that your soothing tone of voice and winning smile should have more than made up for that unfortunate choice of words. After all, in our communications training we claim that "research has shown" that people derive only about 7% of the meaning of a communication from the words themselves which the speaker uses, about 38% is based on tone of voice, and a whopping 55% from the speaker's body language (which includes facial expression). Many of us, including myself, have even dramatized this point by asking trainees in a flip chart type exercise what they believe the relative percentage figures are. When everybody has had a chance to contribute his or her opinion, we leave a lasting impression on them by giving them the "real" figures, and emphasizing, of course, that this is what "research has shown."

## UCLA Research

So where does this so-called "rule", which seems to defy common sense, come from? Whose research are we talking about? We owe considerable thanks to a fellow trainer, in the field of neuro-linguistic programming, by the name of "Buzz" Johnson for shedding light on this question. Like so many of us, Buzz had heard this 7-38-55 rule many times before, without anyone ever being able to give him the source of the research on which it is allegedly based. Buzz doggedly pursued his search for

the source of this rule, which didn't make any sense to him either. Every time he heard a speaker mention the rule, Buzz would ask him or her whose research it was based on. For a long, long time, he got no meaningful answer. Finally he came across a professional speaker who makes his living giving sales seminars, and was making the 7-38-55 rule part of his presentation. Buzz couldn't get the exact name of the researcher from this trainer. But at least he got a couple of approximate pronunciations of the name of the researcher. Buzz pursued the clues and finally found the answer. The studies had been conducted in the 1960's by a UCLA professor by the name of Albert Mehrabian. Buzz wrote up his findings in the July 1994 issue of *Anchor Point*, a magazine for professionals in neuro-linguistic programming.

Mehrabian and his colleagues conducted a series of experiments with college students in the 1960's. They wanted to test the power of tone of voice and the power of body language, like facial expressions, compared to the power of words alone in communicating the speaker's attitude and feelings, particularly when there is an inconsistency between verbal and nonverbal clues.

In the first series of experiments, only one tape recorded word was spoken to the students to communicate a speaker's attitude of liking, disliking, or neutrality toward the listener. The experimental subjects listened to a total of nine such words. Three words, "honey," "dear," and "thanks" were used to indicate liking. Three other words, "brute," "don't", and "terrible" were used to denote disliking. Finally the words "maybe," "really," and "oh" were supposed to represent neutrality. The speakers were instructed to vary their tone of voice three times while speaking each of these words. One time, the speaker's tone of voice was to reflect disliking, another time liking, and still another time neutrality. The statistical results showed that tone of voice was far more important in influencing the subjects' judgments of the true feelings of the speakers than the words themselves.

In the another series of experiments, the researchers added another feature. The subjects were also shown photographs with different facial expressions of the speakers while saying these words. The subjects were

---

\* from published article by Herb Oestreich, "Let's Dump the 55%, 38%, 7% Rule." *Transitions*, (National Transit Institute). Vol. 7, No. 2, November 1999, pp. 11-14.

asked to guess the speaker's feelings based on these facial expressions. This time the facial expressions were found to be the greatest influence in the subjects guessing the feelings behind the speakers' communications of the words. In combining the statistical results of these studies, the researchers came up with the 55%, 38%, and 7% Rule, meaning that in 55% of the cases the listener's judgment of the real feelings of the speaker is based on facial expression (or other body language), in 38% of cases it is based on tone of voice, and only in 7% of the cases it is based on the words themselves.

Mehrabian and his colleagues published the results in May and June 1967, respectively, in two journals: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and the *Journal of Consulting Psychology*. Mehrabian also mentions these study results in two books he published: *Silent Messages* (1971), and *Nonverbal Communication* (1972).

### **So What?**

The more charitably inclined critics of Mehrabian claim that he has been misquoted by the popular press, or quoted out of context, and that this is how the results of his studies were blown out of proportion. Personally I do not agree. I believe Mehrabian himself bears much of the blame. After careful reading of his books and articles, I find that he does not caution the reader adequately of the limited application of his study results. He does not properly emphasize that the disproportionate influence of tone of voice and body language enters the situation only when there is ambiguity in the communication, when the words are inconsistent with the tone of voice or body language of the speaker. For example, in his popular book *Silent Messages*, when quoting the results of his experiments, Mehrabian comments as follows: "Generalizing, we can say that a person's nonverbal behavior has more bearing than his words on communicating feelings or attitudes to others." In my opinion, that is an overstatement. It does not contain a much needed qualification of that conclusion. It does not qualify the conclusion by saying the experiments purposely injected substantial ambiguity into the communication, a deliberate inconsistency between the spoken word on one hand, and tone of voice and facial expression on the other. What if the three are consistent? Which carries greater weight now? And isn't it a bit primitive to assume that a single spoken word is representative of what we commonly call "communication?" Doesn't the fact that the experimenters chose only a single word (like "dear," or "maybe," or "don't") to represent the verbal communica-

tion of an attitude or feeling bias the whole series of experiments? Artificially injecting a strong element of "inconsistency" or "ambiguity" into the communication changes the whole picture. With nothing more to go by, of course the experimental subjects would now seek some clue from the tone of voice and facial expressions of the speakers attitude to make up their minds. And of course they put an exaggerated emphasis on these nonverbal clues to interpret the message when the words themselves are ambiguous. They have hardly anything else to go by. And just how representative is that measly one-word clue of ordinary verbal communication?

### **Other Research**

Perhaps what encouraged Mehrabian to draw such unwarranted conclusions from his rather simplistic experiments was the fact that he had knowledge of the results of more sophisticated experiments conducted in Great Britain. In his book *Silent Messages*, Mehrabian cites the research of Professor Michael Argyle and colleagues at Oxford University to support his own findings. Argyle and colleagues published the results of their experiments in 1970 in the *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. It is obvious that both Mehrabian and Argyle were aware of each other's research well before Argyle's published his article in the British journal. It is also obvious to me that Argyle's experiments were a good deal more sophisticated than Mehrabian's. Most important, the verbal communications given to the subjects were more than just one spoken word to stand for the speaker's attitude or feeling. As a matter of fact, a whole paragraph of words was given to the experimental subjects, including a written copy of the words. The subjects were also shown a series of 18 video clips in random order in which the speakers varied their tone of voice and body language according to the actor's script they were given. The attitudinal dimensions to be tested in these experiments were feelings of superiority, inferiority, and equality, and the degrees to which the experimental subjects perceived the strength of these attitudes in the speaker, based on the verbal and nonverbal clues they were given.

While the researchers concluded that the nonverbal clues were stronger determinants of perceived attitudes than the verbal clues, I believe a second conclusion the British researchers reached is even more important to us as trainers of communications related topics. That conclusion has to do with the researchers' hypothesis that it is normal for verbal and nonverbal cues to operate together. Indeed they conclude: "It can be seen that nonverbal

clues when combined with verbal clues of almost identical strength have 4.3 times as much impact as the verbal clues.”

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The most reasonable approach in our training would be to emphasize that all three clues in communicating with others are essential. Words, tone of voice, and body language must not only be consistent with one another, they must actually support each other. If not, one may easily cancel out the other. Suppose, for example, I tell an employee in a friendly tone of voice: “Hey, Ralph, I’m really interested in what you just said. Tell me more.” At the same time I am looking at my wrist watch or the clock on the wall. Ralph’s interpretation, most likely, is that I am not interested at all in what he has to say. Neither the positive words nor the pleasant tone of voice matter any more. I have blown it. I have let one element in the communication cancel out the other two. Similarly, those of us who are teaching conflict management and negotiating skills want to continue our emphasis on choosing our words carefully. They do matter. And they matter a lot. For example, saying “Yes, and ...” is more likely to make the listener less defensive than habitually saying “Yes, but ...” in negotiations.

For us as trainers, there is little to be gained from differentiating between the strength of these three types of clues in communications. It might lead to foolhardy attempts to try to overemphasize one or the other, when the goal in communications ought to be to make words, tone of voice, and body language voice consistent with one another, support one another, not let one outshine the other, not neglect one or the other.

Let’s dump that 55-38-7% rule. We can still ask trainees in a flip chart type question to guess what “research has shown,” to what degree people rely on tone of voice, body language, or the words themselves in interpreting a speaker’s message. It makes the discussion on what “research has not shown” more interesting and makes it more likely that the participants remember our suggestion that they should pay equal attention to words, tone of voice, and body language – because the combination of the three makes for more powerful communication.

### **References**

Argyle, Michael, and others. “The Communication of Inferior and Superior Attitudes by Verbal and Non-verbal Signals,” *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 9, part 3, September 1970, pp. 222-231.

Johnson, C. E. “Buzz .: “The 7%. 38%, 55% Myth.” *Anchor Point*, Vol.8, No. 7, July 1994, pp.32-36.

Mehrabian, Albert, and Ferris, Susan R. “Inference of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels,” *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 3, June 1967, pp. 248-258.

Mehrabian, Albert, and Wiener, Morton. “Decoding of Inconsistent Communications,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 1, May 1967, pp. 109-114.

Mehrabian, Albert. *Nonverbal Communication*, Aldine Atherton, Inc., 1972.

Mehrabian, Albert. *Silent Messages*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971, particularly pp. 42-43.

Pearson, Judith E., “Debunking the 55%, 38%, 7% Rule.” *The Toastmaster*, Vol. 63, No. 11, November 1997, pp. 24-26.