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Brainstorm: Of Sign Language and Combat Veterans, Part 2

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Of Sign Language and Combat Veterans, Part Two

By: John Medina | Posted: March 26, 2012



In the last entry I talked about sign language, and I promised in this space to talk about combat veterans. This entry fulfills the promise (though I am also going to talk about business cards).

We were exploring the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication, part of our continuing discussion concerning nature, nurture, and human behavior. I introduced you to Dr. David McNeill, emeritus professor in psychology, from the University of Chicago. He was the first researcher to suggest that gestures and speech arose from common cognitive precursors as we developed in our East African womb. That his hypothesis involves neural circuits illustrates we are clearly in the *nature* section of our discussion.

We left off talking about the fact that nonverbal information can take years to interpret correctly, and that many social factors go into decoding specific cues within specific people groups. That, of course, is the *nurture* department of our discussion.

OK, on to the soldiers.

I remember thinking about cultural differences and nonverbal social customs as I viewed the television coverage of Gulf War II on a television whose sound had been turned off (it was in a hospital). I watched transfixed as Iraqi civilians took off their shoes and sandals and silently whacked Saddam's statue with their footgear. It never occurred to me watching the news clips that taking off my sandals and whacking somebody with it would be offensive. I just thought it was odd.

It is not odd in Iraq. As a commentator later that night revealed, this whacking is a high insult in many parts of the Arab world. The fact was graphically illustrating when, years later, an Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at former president George W. Bush, and someone caught it on tape. The fact I did not consider this insulting at first simply illustrates that nonverbal skills vary widely between cultures. They are deeply affected by family, tradition, and

culture, and even vary between individuals. Because of its semi-unconscious origins, we tend to value nonverbal communication over speech, especially when the two disagree. This profoundly underscores the necessity for getting it right.

And we must. The success of the American military efforts in Afghani and Iraqi cultures hinges on their ability to understand the culturally established interactions between the verbal and nonverbal communication. Those soldiers who have advanced skills in this decoding will clearly have an advantage toward winning hearts and minds over those who don't. As the unfortunate nonverbal action of burning the Koran in a Muslim country clearly illustrates, it can be a matter of life and death.

It is also true for success in a variety of fields that don't involve combat. Like parenting. And business. Examples abound of culturally insensitive nonverbal behaviors causing losses to the bottom line. According to one prominent trade organization, there is an excruciatingly common mistake American business people used to make when doing business with certain executives from the People's Republic of China. It has to do with the exchange of business cards. Apparently, it is important to receive a business card with both hands in China, followed by a pause while you study its contents. Then you are to put the card into a small card case, never in your wallet or pocket — and never write on it. Not following these nonverbal protocols can signal disrespect.

If we combine the contents of this blog with the last one, we observe powerful reasons for paying attention to nonverbal information. Not only does exercising nonverbal skills make consistently sharper students, but also, perhaps better soldiers and business people. And we have again our familiar lesson. It is one thing to be born with circuits capable of being shaped by culture. It is another thing to give the brain social time needed to allow that shaping to occur.

Maybe everybody should learn sign language.

Comments

ONE COMMENT TO “OF SIGN LANGUAGE AND COMBAT VETERANS, PART TWO”



Dee Curle says:

April 11, 2012 at 8:14 pm

I'm all for everyone learning sign language. But let us keep in mind, sign language is not universal. It differs from country to country. And there are culturally appropriate and inappropriate signs within each culture. For instance, the American Sign Language sign for the letter “t” is considered a dirty gesture in many countries. So when you travel abroad, mind your p's and q's ... and t's.