

# HOW TO COMMUNICATE USING SPACE

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## What is Proxemics?

The study of the communicative aspects of personal space and territory is called Proxemics. Everyone is surrounded by an invisible zone of psychological comfort that follows us everywhere we travel. This protective bubble acts as a buffer zone against unwanted touching and attacks.

Our comfort zone varies depending on who we are talking to and the situation that we are in. The amount of space that we use while interacting with others can play a significant factor in the type of interaction we have with that person.

## Why is Proxemics important for a negotiation?

Proxemics gives a lot of nonverbal information to the other person regarding the level of trust and intimacy that the person has for them. As cooperation is a key factor in Street Negotiation, you must be able to read their level of comfort with you by the amount of distance that they are comfortable dealing with you at.

Your goal in a negotiation is to gain their cooperation and by knowing how personal space is internally regulated, you can foster better communication and cooperative behavior from your counterpart. Knowing the dynamics of personal space will also prevent you from unknowingly violating your counterpart's personal space and causing unnecessary tension.

## What is our comfort zone?

In 1959, anthropologist Edward Hall discovered that humans are distinctly aware of their perception of space and territory and he conducted numerous studies and experiments in which he concluded that Americans had four distinct comfort distances, each with their own specific ranges of comfort, and that these distances were surprisingly universal to most Americans. He also noted that comfort zones varied drastically between cultures.

The four distances of personal territory for U.S. Americans are:

- **0-18 inches: Intimate distance.** Reserved for deep personal relationships. Vision is impaired at this level and the main senses used are smell and touch. This distance is used for sexual contact or comforting someone.
- **18 inches-4 feet: Personal distance.** Reserved for personal conversation. This distance is used for having personal conversations with friends, family, or associates.
- **4 feet—12 feet: Social distance.** Reserved for formal interactions such as business meetings or interviews.
- **12 feet—line of sight: Public distance.** Reserved for such things as public speaking and lectures.

**Note:** These distances apply only to those interactions where the participants' orientation is face-to-face with each other and are aware of each other's presence.

## **Violating personal space is threatening**

The territorial space that people claim as distinctly belonging to them is their personal space (4 feet). When someone who has not yet gained our trust enters our personal space, we tend to feel uncomfortable or even threatened because the intruder has trespassed onto our own space. This is much the same way as if a stranger walked into the backyard of your home without your permission.

Entering someone's personal distance without first establishing some level of trust can cause conflict and defensiveness to occur. When a violation of space occurs, it causes the other person to become uncomfortable and instinctively they will move themselves away from the person to regain the correct level of personal territory.

You'll want to pay attention to this behavior because it is a sure indication that you have intruded upon their comfort zone. Police officers are sometimes trained in the technique of deliberately invading the personal space of their suspect during an interview to make the suspect feel uncomfortable and intimidating him into giving up information.

## **Proximity separates the strong from the weak**

Our social use for space can tell us a lot about the status, confidence, and power of the people around us. Just look at your own work place and examine who has the biggest office and who commands the most space while walking around.

The people who possess the most power and authority command a greater amount of personal space that they can call their own. They will often distance themselves from other people around them. In the workplace, the "important" top-dog might have their own corner office apart from the rest of the workers who might be crunched together in cubicles.

Confident people and people of higher status are comfortable going straight to the center of the attention while lower status or non-confident people tend to hover near the exits or the back of the room. University studies have shown that the students who sit front and center of the classroom received the highest grades in the class, while those who sat in the back and at the corner's of the room received the worst grades.

The goal is to approach as close as you can to the other person without making them feel uncomfortable. This will facilitate better rapport between both parties.

## **Are they using barriers?**

Any inanimate object that is placed between you and the person you are talking with is an indication of defensiveness.

A table, desk, pillows, drinking glass etc. that is set between you and the other person is an unconscious equivalent of shielding our body from attack and provides us with a level of emotional comfort from something that we do not like. A person who creates barriers between themselves and the other person is usually expressing deception, defensiveness, or ulterior motives.

## Using Proxemics for emotional emphasis

Proxemics can be used in combination with other behaviors to add emphasis to the message. For example, if a person is angry with you and they invade your intimate space, then the perceived threat of their anger is dramatically increased if compared with the same person being angry with you from across the room. If a couple are in love and they are maintaining eye contact with each other from across a room, then the impact of that eye contact is much less meaningful than if they were inches from each other.

### Where should I sit?

- **Side-by-side fosters cooperation.** If you are trying to facilitate cooperation, then the best place for you to sit is by their side (i.e. to their right or left). By sitting to their side, we enhance cooperative behavior from them by conveying that we are not competing against them. It also points both of you towards the direction of the problem that exists, such as a report on the table, or research material that needs organizing.
- **Opposite sides fosters competition.** Sitting directly across from someone, such as an employer sitting direct across from a prospective applicant with a table in between them, tends to foster a competing-type attitude.
- **Sit at 90° for good conversation.** The best seating position at a table for a cooperative exchange of information is at the corner of the table. One person takes one side of the corner and the other person takes the other side.

The benefits of this position are that: (1) It allows for both parties to enter into each other's personal space, creating a stronger bond than if they remained distant from each other. (2) It breaks up the stuffy formality of the situation by moving you closer to them. The corner of the table adds a bit of psychological security for both parties by having a bit of a barrier between them, but it is not as much of a barrier as if you sat opposite one another.

- **Gender differences.** A study done by Byrne and Fisher (1975) showed that American men generally chose to sit across from people who they considered their friends and American women chose to sit adjacent to the people that they considered to be their friends. Additionally, the study showed that men did not like strangers sitting across from them and women did not like having strangers sitting next to them.

### Key points

- Proxemics is the study of the communicative aspects of space.
- Entering one's personal space can cause them to feel threatened.
- Sitting side-by-side fosters cooperation. Sitting opposite one another fosters competition. Sitting 90° to each other fosters conversation.
- Using inanimate objects as barriers is a sign of anxiety, defensiveness, or deception.
- Approach as close as you can to the other person without making them feel uncomfortable. This will increase your rapport.