

Communication

notes to accompany a lecture in ENGR 401

What is the purpose of communication?

- Communication is primarily to transfer ideas from one brain to another.
- If it is a conversation, then there can be two-way communication to allow the listener to clarify what the speaker is trying to communicate.
- One-way communication is also possible, such as via a book. In this case you cannot get feedback and so it is more challenging to get the communication right, which is one reason why writing a book is difficult.

Non-verbal communication

- Not all communication is through speaking.

Clothing

- We say “don’t judge a book by its cover” but people do exactly that — if they do not know you, they will judge you by how you look.
- Professional training will often include courses that help you to understand when you are making those judgements and learning how to compensate for your biases.
- If people know you *and trust you*, they will excuse how you dress (e.g., think of the first time you saw a lecturer with bare feet and how you feel about that same person now).
- If people do not know you or do not trust you, they will judge you by how you choose to present yourself — you cannot change the colour of your skin, your height, or your age but you can choose the colour and style of your hair, the style of your clothes, what you carry your stuff in, and your personal hygiene.
- When going for a job interview, think about what is most appropriate to wear.
- When you observe other people on campus or in town, think about what made them choose to wear what they are wearing.

Body language, eye contact, mind reading

- Human beings are remarkably good at working out other people’s mental state from body posture, facial expression, and tone of voice — psychologists call this “mind reading.”
- Eye contact is important in inter-personal communication — it allows you to monitor the other person’s facial expression and hence monitor their mental state.
- If you are not looking at the other person then you cannot pick up on these subtle cues. Different people have different abilities here and the really good people can distinguish a few hundred distinct mental states. The easy mental states are distinguishable in still photos: happy, sad, angry, disgusted, fearful, surprised. But there are hundreds of subtle mental states that can be picked up through unconscious tracking of small movements, for example, agreeing (gentle nodding of

the head), disagreeing (gentle shaking of the head), interested (tilting the head to one side, paying extra attention), bored, confused, concerned.

- The ability to maintain good eye contact is an important aspect of social interaction. People who look others in the eye are perceived as friendly and welcoming. But do not over-do it: staring is considered aggressive or weird. Many shy and socially anxious people have difficulty with this part of communication.
- How do you get better at eye contact? Some people are good at it because they have been practicing it since early childhood. By contrast, there are some people with a diagnosed condition (such as extreme anxiety or autism) that means that eye contact is particularly challenging, but that is likely to be only 2 or 3 in the whole class. For those who find it challenging, the solution is to practice. If you practice, you will gradually get better at it. When I was called out on my lack of eye contact (and it was pointed out that it was important for my job), I made a conscious decision to practice. I found it hard to make eye contact for the first few months of consciously trying to do it. About nine months in I started to notice when other people didn't make eye contact, which I had never seen before, and I found it helped with getting people to trust me and work with me.

Bias

Everyone exhibits bias. We say “don't judge a book by its cover” but we do. In our industry, we generally work in teams with people from a range of backgrounds; so we need to be aware of our biases and compensate appropriately. In the particular case of recruitment, we particularly need to ensure that we have processes in place to ameliorate the effects of unconscious bias and of discrimination.

New Zealand law prohibits overt discrimination in nine areas:

- Race incl. colour, ethnicity, country of origin
- Relationship status incl. marriage
- Family status incl. not having a family
- Age
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Religious or ethical beliefs
- Political opinions incl. political affiliation
- Disability incl. impairment or illness

Privilege

New Zealand society has developed in a way that it currently privileges certain groups over others. I would argue that the following groups are privileged: pākeha, male, heterosexual, cis-gendered, educated, and wealthy. Legal and practical measures are put in place to compensate for this, in an attempt to give a more level playing field.

Toby Morris's cartoon story [“On a plate”](#), is an effective explanation of privilege and how you can insidiously believe that your good fortune is owing *entirely* to your own efforts rather than *partially* to the privileged position you have in our society.