

# A LINE ON LIFE

4/13/83, Updated 5/5/01

## The Mexican Clock "Walks"

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Did you know that you communicated with time? Although many people are not consciously aware of this, they respond to what people say with time. This is one small aspect of **nonverbal communication** – communication that does not rely on words to give it meaning.

When you are **late** to an appointment, this suggests that you don't care about the other person's time, dislike that person or don't want the meeting to occur. (Do you notice how often people are late to the dentist?) When you apologize or make some excuse for being late, this essentially says, *"Ignore the nonverbal message I sent by being late; there was another reason."* This could be any one of many reasons – your watch was slow, the car didn't start, someone in the family was ill, and so on.

On the other hand, being **early** tends to indicate that you are eager to attend the meeting or it is very important to you. Notice that eager fans may camp out in front of a ticket office hours or days before it opens just to make sure that they get tickets for their favorite event, like the Superbowl or a rock concert. They *really* want those tickets!

Although there is a wide range of individual differences, most middle class people in our culture do not believe they are late, until they are about *5-10 minutes* beyond the time for the appointment. Once they think they are late, they will usually apologize. However, if these same people are only 1-2 minutes beyond the time, they see themselves essentially as being *"on time."* Since they consider themselves to be on time, there is no need for an apology.

Time even communicates in **dating**. Suppose a girl has really adored a boy. Finally he notices her and asks her out for a date, let's say for that Saturday at 7:00 in the evening. She accepts.

Under these conditions, my female students indicate that they would be ready for the date about 30 minutes ahead of time. However, they do not want their date to know that. When the boy comes at about 7:00, the father is supposed to say something like, *"She'll be ready in a few minutes."*

In any two-person situation, the one who seems to want the relationship the most has the least social power. If he finds out that she has been ready for a half-hour, her social power will be lessened. However, being *"ready in a few minutes"* indicates less eagerness, thus maintaining her social power.

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### We need to be aware of cultural differences in nonverbal communication.

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There are also **cultural differences**. When a Mexican says, *"El reloj está caminando,"* this literally means, *"The clock is walking."* Yes, the Mexican clock walks! What does the Gringo (Anglo) clock do? It *"runs"*! Although it might not seem like much, it is a significant difference. The typical Mexican sees time as slowly strolling along, while the middle-class Anglo in the United States sees time as speeding. Here is an example of how this makes a difference.

Suppose you entered an Anglo office and asked an Anglo secretary when her boss will return. She may say, *"He will be back in just a moment."* In this setting, that probably means about **5-10 minutes** (as discussed above). In contrast, suppose you were in a typical Mexican office with a Mexican secretary and asked the same question (this time in Spanish, of course). She would probably respond, *"Momentito."* This literally

translates to "(in) a little moment." (The ending, "-ito," means "small" or "little.") However, her "little moment" is typically about **30 minutes**. This is because the Mexican clock "walks," while the Anglo clock "runs."

In other words, if a typical Mexican comes to an appointment 15 minutes after the indicated time, he will not consider himself late. Therefore he will not apologize. If the person he is meeting is a typical Anglo, he will take the Mexican's "lateness" as a personal insult and probably respond in a not-too-friendly manner. The Mexican will probably not understand why the Anglo is upset. This misunderstanding is because the Mexican clock "walks," while the Anglo clock "runs."

This is also a reason why many Anglos stereotype Mexicans as being "lazy." As a group, Mexicans are *not* lazy. It is just that their clock is "walking," while the Anglo clock is "running." So the next time you have an appointment with a person from another culture, you might want to adjust your clock a little.

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