

Proxemics: The Science of Space

The anthropologist Edward T. Hall created the science of proxemics, which studies how people use, react to, configure, and occupy the space around them. We all want our own space, and we feel uncomfortable when people violate our personal territory. While it may sound overly obvious, research shows that many persuaders get too familiar, too fast. Disrespect for your audience's personal space—especially when you are first meeting them—will definitely not build rapport. Many persuaders don't even know that they are violating their audience's space. They may think, for example, that by reaching out and touching their audience members on the arm, they will be seen as warm and extending. Such as gesture may really be a turnoff, though. What does it feel like? Imagine that you go to a movie theatre and there are 150 seats but only ten people watching the movie. Social custom calls for everyone to spread out. Let's say you take your seat and the nearest person is twenty feet away. How would you feel if a stranger came and sat down right next to you in this theatre of empty seats? That would be a violation of your personal space.

Understanding proxemics requires an understanding of territory and the role of dominance. The bigger office, the armrest on the airplane, the larger chair, sitting at the head of the conference table, getting into someone's face—all these things have hidden meanings. It could be unwanted touching or jumping into a conversation that damages likeability and rapport. Be observant. How is your use of space perceived by your audience? Always err on the side of giving extra space, instead of too little.

Does the science of proxemics really matter? The distance you keep or don't keep when persuading someone communicates a message. Great persuaders understand rapport and interpersonal communication, and they respect personal space. You will find that the amount of space between a person and a persuader affects the way they are able to interact with each other and what message their interaction sends. When we sit at a table or across from a desk, we each draw invisible lines of our perceived personal space. When these invisible territorial lines are violated, tension is created. We all have regions

or areas where we permit others to enter or prevent others from entering. Great persuaders recognize when an invitation to enter their audience's private zone is being extended.

Your audience's intimate area is not to be violated by you, the persuader. In North America, that area extends from your audience's face out to about twenty-four inches. Most social interaction takes place between four and twelve feet of distance. This personal space preference not only varies by individual but also by culture. For example, in the Middle East or Latin America, it is reduced by almost 50 percent.³⁷ In Germany, on the other hand, the space is larger. It is comedic to watch two people from two different cultures trying to communicate. One is violating the other's personal space, while the other is backing up in an attempt to regain his personal space. The two are in some sort of dance to maintain and regain comfortable communication space.

Putting it All Together

Your first impression is critical. It does not matter how fast your car is, or how it will perform, if it is rusted and unpainted. That first impression of a rusted, dirty car will inhibit your ability to convince someone that it is a great car. The ability to create and establish a relationship is critical to your success as a persuader.

Learning to establish an instant connection and to develop long-term rapport will enhance your ability to persuade. Fine-tune your radar to understand how to best respond to the person you are persuading. Remember, first impressions last a long time, and they're hard to change. Applying these principles will ensure that your first encounters go smoothly. Once you've made that initial connection, you can focus on maintaining a genuine, lasting rapport. You will know when you've connected and established rapport. Your audience will be at ease. They will be happy, relaxed, and personable. Your exchanges will flow and feel very natural, like you're talking to an old friend.