



The Silent Signals of Time

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Summary:

Are you ever late? Do you know people who drive you crazy because they are always late? Learn those messages and determine if you might need to set that internal alarm clock up a bit.



Lateness: The Silent Signals of Time

Are you ever late? Does lateness feed you? Do you constantly have people waiting on you? Do you know people who drive you crazy because they are always late? Have you ever admonished someone for always being late? Has someone called you on it? Lateness communicates messages to others. Learn those messages and determine if you might need to set that internal alarm clock up a bit.

I was sure I had time to do a few more things, make a few more phone calls, maybe watch the news. I had plenty of time to pack my suitcase and get to the airport. The flight wasn't leaving for three hours. So I had another bowl of cereal and read a little of the paper then looked up at the clock and realized I had an hour to pack and get on the plane. I threw my stuff in my bag, ran down the stairs, and jumped into the car. Charged with adrenaline, I sped 20 miles over the speed limit, a veritable Andretti at the Indy 500, to get to the airport. Searching madly for a parking space, I squealed the tires to turn sharply around the corner as someone pulled out of one. I ran to the gate flying past hundreds of staring people. Lugging my carry-on over my shoulder like a firefighter's pack, I arrived breathless at the gate as they made the last call. I had made it again. I smiled with satisfaction and slowly walked on the plane.

The term "chronemics" refers to the use of time management as a form of nonverbal communication; and lateness is a profound communicator. With it we communicate to what we never say out loud. The subconscious speaks through our use of time. I was communicating big time.

Ten years ago after one particularly rushed trip. I sat in my airplane seat sipping my ginger ale and asked myself why I was late yet again. I was always rushing to planes. However exact I was with time in the rest of my life, I always seemed to rush to catch my flights. I knew that we

do things because they reward us in some way and I asked myself what I got from running late. Almost immediately I realized the reward: a rush, a racecar driver's high. I ran late to feed my excitement loving soul. The funny thing is that I am a professional speaker. You would think I would get enough adrenaline standing up in front of audiences. But apparently I didn't.

So instead of spending the flight reading Delta Sky Magazine and picking out things I couldn't afford such as chair massagers and surround sound speakers, I spent that flight figuring out what I could do to satisfy that need without running late to the airport. Among other things on my adrenaline list was a comedy improv class and a weekly singles group. The rush replacements worked. These days even my limo driver thinks I leave too early to get to the airport. But I like being on time too much to regard his teasing. Lateness doesn't feed my soul anymore.

Are you ever late? Does lateness feed you? Do you constantly have people waiting on you? Do you know people who drive you crazy because they are always late? Have you ever admonished someone for always being late? Has someone called you on it? Here are other ways that lateness communicates. Look at the list for the likely match or combination of matches to your issue. Be gentle with your self and your assessment of others; everyone is late some of the time. You can just be having one of those days. Instead look for a pattern of behavior.

1. THE RUSH

Lateness feeds the adrenaline junkie. If you love thrills and excitement, and there are not enough in your life, you may use running late as a way getting your excitement fix. Instead of speeding like a maniac to be on time, give yourself other opportunities to feed your fire. Perhaps tango lessons, skydiving, and hockey tickets or take up boxing.

2. THE TIME-CHALLENGED

Face it; some people are clueless about time. They just don't understand that an hour has sixty minutes. They say they will be there in 15 minutes and they arrive 45 minutes later, truly unaware they are late. This personality might be called the absent-minded professor. They also can't seem to understand how long an activity truly takes. For example, they think they can wait to leave the office for a meeting 10 miles across town 5 minutes before the meeting. They don't factor in how long it will take to get their meeting materials packed up, how long it will take to get to the car, the traffic on the way and how long it may take to find a place to park. They also don't allow for the unexpected delays such as an accident on the road. Because they have an unrealistic sense of time, they tend to fall privy to the "one more thing" phenomenon. That is they try to do one more thing before they leave. They check their e-mail one more time before they go down the hall for the meeting. They make one more phone call before they leave the house for the

appointment. Because their sense of time is unrealistic, they think they can stretch it and bend it like silly putty. I have a friend with a master's degree in statistics. He calculates statistical formulas for credit ratings. He is a very bright man. He is always late. Talking to him about it didn't change his behavior. Because he is almost always exactly an hour late, when I need to meet with him at 6:00 I tell him 5:00. He shows up at 6:00. We can still be friends. The good news is that if these people are clued in about their issue and they want to change, they can. The time-challenged just need to realistically examine their schedule and ask them how long their activities truly take.

3. CONTROL

Lateness is a form of control. If you are consistently late to dinner or appointments because you spent a few extra minutes getting ready or you didn't give enough leeway for traffic, you may be saying to the person who is waiting: "I am more important than you. You must wait for me." By making others wait you have power over them even if it's only the power to make them tap their fingers on the desk, make them order another drink or hold up dinner till you get there. It is passive aggressiveness in its finest form, the invisible attack. People can get mad at you but it makes them look impatient or unreasonably demanding. After all, how are you supposed to control the external world? You can always have an excuse, the phone rang, someone came into my office with a problem, and I couldn't find my cell phone. You have power over everyone who waits for you. In fact, you may actually avoid being on time because it would communicate that you are kowtowing to others. People who don't have power typically use this form of time use. They are not the Big Boss. They would be uncomfortable doing anything directly to gain power, to ask for what they want, to demand attention. By using a silent command they get the rush of control without the risk of counterattack. Children are the true masters. They can't find their homework or their right shoe, they need a drink of water, they have trouble with their buttons, anything to postpone bedtime or school.

4. LOW SELF ESTEEM

When lateness doesn't matter because you don't matter then perhaps your lateness communicates your low self-esteem or your lack of confidence. If you think, no one will notice anyway, you are discounting your value as a human being. And why would you worry about others if you don't have any concern for yourself. It doesn't matter if you're rude or inconsiderate, if you just plain don't matter. A lack of respect for yourself inhibits your ability to respect others.

My friend Ginger had a college chum, named Angie, who was always late. After Ginger sat alone in one too many restaurants, she shared with me that she was going to write this person a letter and tell her she didn't want to be friends anymore. I knew from Ginger's conversations that Angie was very unhappy about her weight, discouraged

that no one asked her out, and because she couldn't find a job in her field, she was working for her dad. I suspected she wasn't feeling very good about herself. I suggested to Ginger she try to meet with her friend face to face to tell her how her lateness made her feel. They arranged to meet at restaurant where there was entertainment. Ginger arrived at the bar to watch the band. No friend. She got up to call her. Returned, still no friend, but a very cute blond guy was in her seat. She struck up a conversation with the cute man. Moved in with him three days later. A year passed and she married him. Angie missed the wedding. She walked into the church an hour late.

5. SOS! NOTICE ME

Sometimes, something or many things in life are going wrong, and it is just too horrible to say out loud. So you communicate with your tardiness. Your lateness says: Isn't it horrible that I'm late? Please ask me why, so I can tell you the horrible thing I am dealing with. I knew someone who had been attacked in her home. She was living far away from her family for the first time and had no close friends. There was no one to share her pain with. She told us with her time use. She became habitually late. She kept everyone in our office waiting wondering whether she was all right. It was a powerful SOS repeated over and over from a life that was sinking fast. It was only when the boss sat her down and reprimanded her that the story of her ordeal came tumbling out. The boss listened to her and recommended among other things that she share her burden with a few of us. We supported her and soon she didn't need her silent cry of lateness to communicate any more.

6. THE BIG EGO

Related to the need for control is the BIG EGO. The difference is that silent controllers have no assigned power and big egos do. They feel they have the right to be late-that it comes as part of their royalty package. The big ego says with his time use, I am so important that you the little peon who is waiting must sit patiently for me to arrive. As if they should be greeted with a standing ovation and Hail Caesars. You know the type. The big boss who keeps everyone waiting for the meeting to start. They come sauntering in smiling, not caring about their rudeness. In fact, they may revel in it. Or they come in ranting and complaining about the big problem they had to solve or the disaster they averted before they could honor you with their presence. Only the Pope and Superman have saving super powers worth waiting for. I remember sitting at a conference table full of coworkers, waiting for the president of the company to arrive. This happened every meeting and ended with the same ritual. He would walk through the conference room door, go over and get his doughnuts asking the female nearest him to get him coffee all the while greeting a selective few people at he table with the same greeting. "Hey, how are you feeling?" If he had asked me that question, I would

have been tempted to reply. "Miffed and insulted by your lack of consideration." He never asked me.

7. HIDDEN ANGER

Sometimes we leave people waiting because we hate them. Okay, "hate" may be too strong a word. Let's say, because we are secretly unhappy with them. We may be jealous, envious, resentful or just plain not like that person. When I say this is a secret I mean these feelings may even be a secret even from you. While the feeling swirls in your subconscious, you may not even be aware that you are mad or have other negative feelings.

Perhaps you would like to think you never get mad because you are just too nice a person. Perhaps the person you leave waiting has too much power over you for it to be safe to be mad at them directly. In any case, like a child who sticks out their tongue at someone when their back is turned, when you leave a friend waiting at a restaurant by themselves, standing on a street corner, sitting in a conference room, you are acting just as childish. Again, this behavior is passive aggressive. You could be assertive and say out loud, "I have a problem." But it is somehow easier to show up late.

I know someone whose husband is habitually late. She sits in the living room dressed for a cocktail party or dinner with friends wondering if he has been in a car accident. Trips to pick up one thing at Home Depot so they can finish with a project become three-hour marathons of waiting while the paint hardens on the brushes. She and her children have waited for him to eat so many dinners they are now used to eating at 8:00. Her family and friends have experienced her stress and humiliation as they waited with her so now they suggest plans that don't include him. This has led to arguments of course, but he always has an external excuse for his lateness. In her mind the message he is sending is that his work and tasks are more important than she is. Underneath there may be a bigger message. He may be saying, "I am angry and unhappy, and I don't know how to express it." Lateness does not always have a Freudian or hidden message. And you may rarely be left tapping your foot or checking your watch. But remember, time communicates. If you are walking through the door apologizing and complaining about traffic or last-minute phone calls, listen to the message you are sending. Now you have the handbook for the silent signals of lateness.

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