

they simply want to erect some sort of 'front' and only reveal to the customer the part of their domain that is presentable.

I was working for a large company, advising it on new central headquarters. This company rather dominated the small town it was in, and had grown up over the years to occupy many small buildings dotted around the town for offices. The company did, however, have a large central site, which had been occupied by a now defunct industrial process. The idea was to move all the office staff into this old industrial building in a large open-plan office. The company secretary had what he thought to be a rather nice idea, which was to locate the telephone operators in an area just inside the entrance to the office space. Previously they were in a windowless and airless basement in thoroughly uncomfortable surroundings. He reasoned that since they spoke daily on the telephone to all the staff it would be nice for them actually to meet and put faces to all the voices. This re-location was completed, and indeed as all the office staff arrived in the morning they would greet the telephonists as they passed and this was genuinely appreciated. However after a few weeks, and for the first time in the history of the company, these telephonists went on strike. They claimed that they wanted more pay since they were using new technology, but the new technology actually made their job easier rather than more difficult. It eventually turned out that this was a dispute about the loss of 'back of house' space. Telephone exchange operators can only work in responsive mode, and unless the telephone rings there is nothing for them to do. Being previously entirely in 'back of house' space, they had adopted the practice of bringing in magazines to read, jumpers to knit and so on. Once they were positioned 'front of house', they felt unable to continue this practice in full view of other staff. They even felt uncomfortable about having the knitting or magazines lying on their desk, giving the game away. Such a complaint is simply too difficult to express to an employer, especially one who meant so well in the first place. Consequently, through an inevitable series of misunderstandings the whole situation had escalated to a strike!

Variations

Just as with our study of distance in the previous chapter, there are many variations in proxemic behaviour. These variations can be driven by personality, status and culture.

A man comes into a colleague's office. The occupant of the office is talking on the telephone, but gestures a welcome and indication for the visitor to sit down. The visitor does not sit down, but remains standing over him. After a short while the office occupant tells the person on the other end of the line that he will call them back. In an alternative to this scenario the visitor waves his hand as a return acknowledgement and quietly leaves the office. Finally, in the third