

Body Language: A Key to Success in the Workplace

by Carmine Gallo

Wednesday, February 14, 2007 provided by 

Let's say you're all set for your big interview—the one you're confident will change your career. You know you can wow the person across the desk with your accomplishments. Or you're ready to give the presentation that reflects months of hard work and success. But before you even open your mouth, the rest of your body has already spoken volumes.

What does your body language say? Does it say you're confident, smart, and enthusiastic—or just the opposite?

Only a small percentage of communication involves actual words: 7%, to be exact. In fact, 55% of communication is visual (body language, eye contact) and 38% is vocal (pitch, speed, volume, tone of voice). The world's best business communicators have strong body language: a commanding presence that reflects confidence, competence, and charisma.

More Than Words

One problem with body language is it may not convey what you really feel. For example, keeping your hands stiffly by your side or stuck in your pockets can give the impression that you're insecure—whether you are or not.

Avoiding looking at people—maybe simply because you're too busy consulting your notes or your résumé—can lead people to think you're being less than honest with them. You may be slouching because you're tired, but people may read it as a sign that you're not interested.

Conversely, strong and effective body language can help establish an immediate rapport with your audience, signaling confidence in your message. Look at photographs of Ronald Reagan. He carried himself impeccably even on the back of a horse at his ranch. He had an aura of confidence, optimism and power.

The Eyes Have It

People want to feel special. They want to feel as though you are speaking to them directly or that they are the most important person in the room during your conversation. Breaking eye contact is a surefire way to break the connection.

During presentations, mentally split the room into thirds. Address some of your comments to one side of the room, turn your attention to the middle, and then look to the last section. Pick out one person in each section and direct your comments toward that person. The people surrounding that person will think you are making direct eye contact with them.

More from BusinessWeek:

- [Slideshow: Keys to Commanding Body Language](#)
- [How to Wow Them Like Steve Jobs](#)
- [Terminate Your Public Speaking Fears](#)

Maintaining eye contact throughout your presentation requires preparation. The material on your slide should be committed to memory; otherwise you will be stuck reading instead of connecting. Make sure you know what's in your résumé or notes so you're not constantly referring to them.

Don't let anything come between you and your listeners. Crossing your arms, standing behind a podium or chair, or talking to someone from behind a computer monitor are all examples of blocking, which prevents a real connection from taking place.

Think openness. Remove physical barriers—podiums, computers, chairs. Even a folder on a desk can break the connection and create distance.

Animate Yourself

When you're speaking, let your hands do some of the talking. Great speakers use hand gestures more than on average. A professor who studies body language once told me that complex gestures—two hands above the waist—reflect complex thinking. Gestures give the listener confidence in the speaker.

Try this: Watch people such as Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, Barack Obama, Tony Blair or any number of charismatic speakers. You will immediately begin to notice that they punctuate nearly every sentence with a hand gesture. C-SPAN carries weekly debates between British Prime Minister Blair and members of the House of Commons. Watch it once and you will never doubt the importance of effective hand gestures.

And move the rest of your body, too. Great speakers move around the room, pointing to a slide instead of reading from it, placing their hands on someone's shoulders instead of keeping their distance. Don't animate your slides—animate your body!

Stand—or sit—tall. Poor posture is often associated with a lack of confidence or a lack of engagement or interest. For example, during a job interview, leaning back in your chair can give the impression that you're lazy, unmotivated, or dispassionate about the position. Keep your head up and back straight. Lean forward when seated. By sitting toward the front of your chair and leaning forward slightly, you will look far more interested, engaged, and enthusiastic.

It's All Learnable

I once worked with a client preparing for a major presentation to his company's largest investors. His body language was a mess—eyes cast downward, hands awkwardly tucked in his pockets, swaying back and forth. This guy was a poster boy for poor body language. He seemed insecure and out of his league.

By showing him a videotape of what he looked like and working on eye contact, hand gestures, animation, posture and staying open, this executive went on to rock the house during his presentation. He made solid eye contact with everybody in the room, he pulled his hands out of his pockets and used purposeful, assertive hand gestures. His posture and stance exuded power, confidence, and competence—he had charisma.

So work on your body language. Pay as much attention to it as the words you use, and watch your influence soar!

Copyrighted, Business Week. All rights reserved.

ADVERTISEMENT