

Body Language Is The Missing Link In Effective Communication

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I've seen this happen with leaders at all levels on an organization – their powerful messages get derailed by the missing link of effective body language.



Does what you say align with how you look?

There's no doubt that words have power, and that a well-delivered speech can inspire teams, build collaboration, and reinforce organizational vision and values. However, what leaders say is only part of the communication equation: How they say it (paralinguistics) and how they look when they say it (body language) can undermine even the most powerful verbal message. That's because most leaders underestimate the impact of their nonverbal communication.

When designing your leadership communication strategy, here are three body language links to be aware of:

Link #1) Misaligned or negative nonverbal cues undermine credibility, create confusion, and render even the most carefully chosen words ineffective.



A leader outlining a vision for the company's future while constantly glancing at notes or looking away can seem unprepared or untrustworthy. A leader crossing arms while encouraging feedback sends a contradictory message, stifling collaboration. And wearing a smile while delivering bad news, such as budget cuts or layoffs, makes a leader appear uncaring and out of touch.

Blame it on the limbic brain, where emotions are processed. When your words deliver one message, but your body language sends a conflicting one, people instinctively trust what they see over what they hear. That's why a leader delivering optimistic news with crossed arms, a frown, or a while slouching is *less* likely to be believed than one displaying the “pro social” signals of open arm gestures, a genuine smile, and good posture. Likewise, that same positive message can get derailed if delivered in a flat monotone, which makes the speaker sound uninterested and causes the audience to question a leader's authenticity.

Misaligned nonverbal communication can dilute or derail even the most compelling verbal message, and almost always results in a leader being perceived as inauthentic, untrustworthy, confusing, or ineffective. By understanding the power of nonverbal communication and aligning it with their words, leaders can ensure their message resonates, builds credibility, and inspires action.

Link #2) If you are a leader in a global organization, be aware that body language meanings can differ across cultures.

- A firm handshake may signify confidence in one culture but come across as overly aggressive in another.
- Eye contact, valued in some cultures as a sign of openness and candor, might be seen as rude or intrusive elsewhere.
- An enthusiastic presentation in one culture can be viewed as overly aggressive in another.
- Many emblematic gestures have cultural overtones. For example, what we in the U.S. think of as a positive gesture — the “OK” sign with thumb and forefinger together creating a circle — has very different meanings in other countries. In France it means “worthless” or “zero.” In Japan, it stands for money. And in other parts of the world it represents a lewd or obscene comment.



While acknowledging these (and other) cultural differences, most global audiences will have a negative reaction to any leader’s excessive fidgeting (like tapping a pen, shifting weight from side to side), aggressive gestures (like finger pointing or standing too close for personal comfort), and harsh vocal tones (like yelling and sarcastic delivery).

Link #3) The people who report to you are constantly reading your body language to gauge your authentic emotions:

- **Your mood:** If you are in a great mood, you are most likely walking around with your shoulders back, a smile on your face, and your head held high. But if disappointed or depressed, your shoulders will begin to round forward, and you'll cave in slightly at the chest.



To judge whether this is a good time to approach you, people will notice your open or closed body language. In the ultimate closed body posture, arms are folded, legs are crossed, and the torso or legs are turned away. In open and receptive body postures, legs are uncrossed, arms are open with palms exposed or resting comfortably on the desk or conference table, and head, shoulders, and feet are all pointed toward the other person.

• **Your stress level:** Holding our breath is a primitive instinct – a hardwired reaction (the freeze portion of the “flight, fight or freeze” response) when facing a threat. Today, even though threats are more likely to be psychological than physical, any anxiety can cause you to hold your breath or to breathe high in your chest is small, shallow breaths.



• **Your favorites:** People will judge the closeness of your relationships by the amount of warm body language you display: The greater amount of eye contact you give when someone is talking, the more you’ll be judged to favor that individual. When you begin to mirror someone’s gestures and facial expressions, you’ll send strong signals of liking or admiring her.

Leaning is another way your body indicates your feelings about various people on the team. Positive attitudes toward those you like and whose opinion you respect tend to be accompanied by leaning forward. Leaning backward usually signals feelings of dislike, dismissal, or negativity. It’s another hardwired response from the limbic brain; we subconsciously try to distance ourselves from anything unpleasant or dangerous.

For leaders, body language savvy is more than a supplementary skill; it is a cornerstone of effective communication and influence. Mastering the art of nonverbal communication enables leaders to build trust, inspire confidence, and foster collaboration. In a world where actions often speak louder than words, understanding and harnessing body language is essential for leadership excellence.