

Making the most of your body language

The vast majority of our communication is non-verbal. The actual words we use account for less than 10 per cent of the message we convey.

Many non-verbal signals don't even register on our conscious awareness. We just have 'a feeling' about it. Ever said: "Lets meet up for a drink" to someone, who has answered: "Great, yes, we must," but something made it obvious to you that there would be no drink? It was all in communicated in the way it was said.

We have identified some areas below for you to work on to help you manage your own unintentional non-verbal communication. Use these to help you avoid common pitfalls and present yourself at your best in face-to-face situations such as meetings and interviews.

Health Warning!

It is far more important that you are relaxed and being yourself when trying to impress than it is to observe any of the following tips. If you find yourself in an important situation using too much headspace worrying about any of the following, then drop it all, and just be yourself. The time to work at this is before the meeting when you can practice and incorporate some new habits. To focus on yourself too much in the meeting will make you look distracted, the exact opposite of what you are trying to achieve!

Tips to help you use your body language more effectively

Posture

Your posture is one of the first things that will be noticed when you walk in to a room or even when you are waiting in reception. Holding your head up with your shoulders comfortably back while looking straight at people makes you look confident, giving an impression of competence. Looking down and hunching makes you look nervous and scared.

How you walk into the room matters too. Though there is a balance to be achieved here: marching in like you own the place can be as unappealing as sliding round the wall and making a dash for the chair you have been allocated.



Generally you should to walk in with an upright posture looking around you and making eye contact with others in the room.

When being interviewed, sitting up and leaning slightly forward when listening will make you look interested. Tilting your head slightly also looks like you are really trying to listen well. Chances are you will do this naturally anyway.

Lean too far in and you can look desperate. Sitting back can be perceived as more confident. Leaning right back in the chair, with an arm swung over the back and a leg over the arm, would be too casual and relaxed in most situations however.

Aim to maintain an open posture. Avoid sitting with your arms hugging yourself and your legs in a double knot.

Eye contact

Maintain good eye contact but don't stare. Avoiding eye contact can cause people to perceive that you are nervous, disinterested or even dishonest. The truth is that people are just comfortable with differing amounts of eye contact. Many find sustained eye contact really uncomfortable and it almost stops them hearing what is being said. If this describes you, you might want to ask some friends to practice asking you questions and chatting with you while you practice increasing your eye contact. Get feedback to make sure this is coming across naturally.

It's important to focus on the person or people you are meeting. Eyes wandering round the room, checking out the décor or clock watching, may come across as bored or rude.

Breathe

While it's obvious that we need to be doing this not to keel over, you'd be amazed how many people adopt a shallow, rapid version of breathing when they get into a situation they are nervous about.

Before going into a stressful situation, take three long, slow breaths, which in itself is incredibly calming to do. Then remember to breathe more deeply and slowly when you are in your meeting. Rapid shallow breathing is part of the flight or fight response. Slowing your breathing gives you more space to think, makes you look more relaxed and you won't sound breathless when you talk.

Smile

Remember to smile when you walk into an important meeting. People will generally smile back because it's an automatic reflex for most people. This sets your own mood on 'positive' and gets the meeting off to a much nicer non-verbal start.



Gestures

If you naturally use gestures when you talk, unless you've been told you do this to a point that is distracting, carry on. Gestures are a natural part of communication. In fact, some find it hard to express themselves if they can't use their hands.

However, wild windmill gestures will quickly drown out what you are actually saying. Avoid obviously aggressive gestures like stabbing the air with a pointed finger or clenching your fist or punching your own palm.

Be aware of the gestures you use when nervous, e.g., tugging your lip, pulling your ear and biting your nails and make an effort to avoid them. As far as possible keep your hands away from your face, otherwise, you look nervous. Watch out for picking nails or fiddling with buttons on your clothes, which has the same effect. Take in a prop like a pen and notepad if that helps – as long as you don't start clicking the pen! Fidgeting and self-comforting gestures of any kind are generally to be avoided, but everyone is human, so don't worry if the odd one slips through.

Personal space

We've probably all had an experience of someone standing too close when they are talking to us, or, where we feel people keep moving out of earshot, when we are trying to tell them something really important. These are examples of a personal space mismatch. Some people need a good half metre between them and the person they are talking to in order to feel comfortable, others will feel too far away if the space is greater than 30cm!

Walking into a room and putting your papers down on someone's desk or putting your elbows on it and leaning across can violate personal space. Keep this in mind and be sensitive to this.

Matching

Many of the areas above can be tempered by watching what everyone else is doing. If you are with individuals who are very loud, make sure you speak up. Conversely, if you can hear a pin drop and everyone else is speaking in hushed tones, your best theatre bellow is probably not required.

Be aware of any major differences about you and them. If they are wildly enthusiastic and gesturing madly, tone your enthusiasm and gestures up and vice versa. Remember, if the gulf between you is too large, this probably isn't a group you would be happy working with anyway, so don't get too carried away with trying to fit in.

Test drive other people's confidence

If you are preparing for an important meeting and are worried about how you will come across, think of someone you know, or know of, who would carry it off with style. Step into their shoes for an hour or even a day: hold yourself in their posture; use their gestures; think like you think they would; go shopping as them and walk down the street as them. See what it feels like to have their confidence.



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Take the bits you like from that experience and know that you can use them whenever you want to. Do the same with someone else and take the best bits of that too. It's amazing how well we can step into someone else's shoes and feel a totally different and beneficial experience.

Be truthful

Have you ever tried to say yes and shake your head in the no gesture? If not, try it now. Now try the reverse, saying no, at the same time nodding your head. Most people find this tough because your body wants to agree with what you are saying.

This is why it's always best to tell the truth, especially in a situation like an interview, where you are being closely examined. When you say yes but mean no, your body gives little contradictory clues. And, because we all read body language at an unconscious level, this registers and we just don't believe what we hear. Studies have demonstrated that when the verbal message doesn't agree with the non-verbal message, we generally believe the non-verbal!

Q QUICKTIPS

