

## Big Blunder <sup>2</sup> } Using Body Language Improperly

*What you are shouting so loud in my ears, I cannot hear what you say.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

### ***Interesting Study***

Amy Cuddy, social psychologist and associate professor at Harvard Business School, shows us the importance of “power posing” to convey confidence, power, and competence. Her research shows how “faking” body postures for just a few minutes changes our cortisol and testosterone levels, helps us perform better in job interviews, and allows us to take risks and handle stressful situations.

The research indicates when individuals feel personally powerful, they are more present and in touch with their own feelings and thoughts. This helps them to connect with the feelings and thoughts of others. With this personal power comes self-motivation and a personal drive to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

If we are both listening to someone's words and watching his or her body language, we always respond to the body language first. Body language accounts for an astounding 55% of an impression, and those impressions are made within seconds. While the meaning behind body language may not be entirely clear, being aware of and understanding the general guidelines regarding body language will provide you with powerful ammunition to convey the nonverbal messages you wish to send.

We all send off “engagement signals”—signals that tell people how confident we feel, how much we want to be there, and how interested we are in them—the moment we come into contact. Whether you are walking down a hallway or arriving at a meeting, be aware of the signals you are sending out and manage them accordingly to make your intended impression.

### On the Side

“I was having a terrible experience buying a car. No one was taking me seriously, which was very frustrating. A friend of mine referred me to a dealership where he had been treated well. I decided this was the last place I would visit before I resorted to the Internet. When I walked in, an extremely professional and polished gentleman in a suit came up and greeted me. He made confident eye contact, smiled, put out his hand, introduced himself by name, and welcomed me to the dealership. I was sold! The salespeople at the two top-notch dealerships I visited previously had given me fishy handshakes and made no eye contact. It was as though they were saying that they didn't want my business.”

—Female advertising agency executive

During the next week, be aware of your own body language, and observe the body language and gestures of the people around you—while on the telephone, in a meeting, on an elevator, or while driving or dining.

## Ask Yourself These Crucial Questions

- ▶ How does my body language relate to how I feel?
- ▶ Has my awareness changed my body language at all?
- ▶ What did I notice about others?
- ▶ What perceptions do I have and what impressions have I formed?

## Tips

### Handshakes

- ▶ Your handshake must be firm. A firm handshake communicates confidence.
- ▶ The web between your thumb and forefinger should meet the web of the other person's hand.
- ▶ Extend your hand immediately at the beginning and end of an interaction.
- ▶ Stand when you are shaking hands.
- ▶ Make direct eye contact and smile while shaking hands.
- ▶ Smiling while shaking someone's hand builds a connection.
- ▶ If you realize that you "missed hands" and the handshake was not good,

### *Interesting Study*

Greg Stewart, associate professor of management and organizations at the University of Iowa, has conducted numerous studies on handshakes and their effects. "We've always heard that interviewers make up their mind about a person in the first two or three minutes of an interview, no matter how long the interview lasts. We found that the first impression begins with a handshake that sets the tone for the rest of the interview. . . . We probably don't consciously remember a person's handshake or whether it was good or bad," Stewart says. "But the handshake is one of the first nonverbal clues we get about the person's overall personality, and that impression is what we remember."<sup>2</sup>

make a comment like, “Oh, that wasn’t a very good handshake; can we do that again?” It is better to do that than leave the other person feeling negative about the impression you made.

- ◆ Keep your body leaning forward. Do not lean back or put a shoulder back. This gives an impression of arrogance.

## Eye Contact

Eye communication involves more extended eye contact—at least three to five seconds. It establishes rapport, helps others retain what you are saying, increases your persuasiveness, and drives involvement.

- ◆ Make eye contact immediately when meeting a person.
- ◆ Maintain eye contact throughout your conversation.
- ◆ Do not dart your eyes from one place to the next, even if you are nervous.
- ◆ When you ask or answer a question, make and maintain eye contact.
- ◆ When you shake hands at the end of the interaction, maintain eye contact.
- ◆ Positive eye contact does not mean staring. Make eye contact during approximately 85 percent of the conversation.
- ◆ Do not roll your eyes when you do not agree with what is being said.
- ◆ Do not hold an “eye communication sidebar” with another person regarding something being said by another person in the conversation.
- ◆ Do not squint to show annoyance. Keep eyes open and engaged.
- ◆ Long slow blinks or keeping your eyes closed while speaking is distracting to others.

- ▶ Use your eye contact to build rapport. Validate, acknowledge, show agreement, and encourage through your eye contact. Keeping your eyes wide and nodding your head “yes” reflects your positive feelings.

## Facial Expressions

Basic facial expressions that depict human emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, and anger are recognized around the world, with minor variations. In 1872, Charles Darwin published these findings in *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

### Smile

- ▶ If you do not smile a lot, practice, practice, and practice smiling more. Practice in a mirror to get used to the feeling.
- ▶ A smile creates rapport and makes you and others feel good.
- ▶ Smiles correlate to health, happiness, and success.
- ▶ Studies have shown that the brain cannot tell the difference between a fake smile and a real smile. If you don't feel it, fake it!

### *Interesting Study*

A study by psychologist Dr. Robert Zajonc suggests that if you put a smile on your face, it can move you in the direction of a positive feeling. The research points to a cause-and-effect relationship between brain activities like smiling and happiness.<sup>3</sup> Your movements can send powerful messages.

### Posture

- ▶ Do not slouch when sitting or standing. This type of posture is often associated with a lack of confidence.

- ◆ Use your upright posture as a way to show that you know what you are talking about and are sure of yourself.
- ◆ Use your breath to help you keep an upright posture during difficult conversations.
- ◆ Keep in mind that all the studies on body language show that bad posture not only sends negative impressions out to other people, but it also affects how you feel about yourself.

### **Strategies to Improve Your Posture**

- Pull your shoulders back and lift your chin up slightly.
- Balance on both feet.
- While seated, make sure the curve in your lower back is away from the chair while lengthening your torso.
- Breathe deeply. Shallow breaths make you slouch.

### **Arm and Hand Positions**

- ◆ Do not put your hands in your pockets.
- ◆ Keep your hands in view, either on your lap or at your side.
- ◆ Keep your fingers and nails out of your mouth and preferably away from your face.
- ◆ Do not cross your arms. This behavior is often misinterpreted as anger, lack of interest, or boredom.
- ◆ Do not fidget with your pens, hair, rings, and so forth.
- ◆ Do not point your fingers or make a fist. These actions may make others feel intimidated.
- ◆ Always cover your mouth when coughing or yawning. When coughing try to cough into your forearm. This alleviates others from focusing on the germs that you may transfer through your handshakes or touching pens, and so on.
- ◆ Keep your arm gestures open, and maintain open palms.

## Overall Body Movement that Portrays Confidence

- ◆ Walk through your office with your head up straight and eyes focused in front of you; smile at people you pass and take confident strides.
- ◆ You may move quickly, but try not to look as though you are frazzled or in a hurry.
- ◆ Keep your lower body still while sitting in a meeting.
- ◆ Fidgeting is a sign of anxiety. Still hands with purposeful movement portray confidence.

Remember that people focus on your body language even before you begin to speak, and 55 percent of the impression you make is nonverbal. How people initially perceive you sets the stage for all the interactions that follow. A negative impression can be damaging to your image and is very hard to overcome.

Even if you don't feel confident in a situation, others must think you are! Make sure the signals you send are positive ones.