

# Watch Your Language

Your colleagues have a lot more to say than you think—  
learn how to read body language like a pro.

By Carol Kinsey Goman



**Previously, most explanations of human behavior in the workplace presumed that people were best persuaded by reason and logic. But now, that assumption is being challenged by researchers who have found that people are more likely to be convinced not by the content of the spoken word, but by the kinds of signals that business professionals often overlook—tone of voice and body language.**

In the workplace, we all express enthusiasm, warmth, and confidence, as well as arrogance, indifference, and displeasure through our facial expressions, gestures, touch, and use of space. It is impossible not to communicate nonverbally.

The way you carry yourself when you walk into a room, the firmness of your handshake, the quality of your eye contact—all of this nonverbal activity (along with the rest of your gestures and expressions) is picked up consciously or subconsciously by whomever is watching. And people are making judgments about your status,

character, and credibility based on how they perceive you. And how they perceive you is based primarily on your body language.

The problem is that body language is like a computer. We all know what it is, but most of us are never exactly sure how it works. Take Sara, for example.

Sara, a vice president at a utility company, complained that she was consistently overlooked for executive positions. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” she told me. “I’m smart, enthusiastic and hard-working. I can’t figure out why people don’t warm up to me.”

Well, maybe she couldn’t figure it out, but if you saw Sara in action, you’d know exactly what her problem was.

During my session with Sara, her eyes darted around the room as if searching for the nearest exit; her hands made choppy gestures; and she drummed her fingers on the conference table. I’d been with the woman for only an hour, and already I was just

as jumpy as she made all her business colleagues feel when dealing with her.

Sarah thought of herself as projecting enthusiasm and energy. But the nonverbal cues she displayed were picked up as impatience and nervousness.

This is a common situation with body language. Often, your nonverbal signals don’t convey what you intended them to. You may be slouching because you’re tired, but people read it as a sign of disinterest. You may be more comfortable standing with your arms folded across your chest (or you may be cold), but others see you as resistant and unapproachable. And 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.

By paying more attention to what your body language is saying, you can become more proficient at incorporating nonverbal signals of confidence, trust, and credibility. To do so, keep these tips in mind:

**Smile.** A smile is an invitation, a sign of welcome. It says, “I’m friendly and approachable.”

**Shake hands.** This is the quickest way to establish rapport. It’s also the most effective. Research shows it takes an average of three hours of continuous interaction to develop the same level of rapport that you can get with a single handshake.

(Just make sure you have palm-to-palm contact and that the web of your hand touches the web of the other person’s.)

**Remove barriers between you and the other person.** Take away things that block your view. Move the phone or stacks of paper on your desk. Better still, come out from behind your desk and sit next to the person you’re dealing with.

**Maintain positive eye contact.** Greater eye contact almost always leads to greater liking and feelings of inclusion. Remember also that people will assume you are not listening (and not interested) if your eyes scan the room or if your gaze shifts to paperwork, your cell phone, or your computer screen.

**Use palm-up hand gestures when speaking.** Keeping your movements relaxed, using open arm gestures, and showing the palms of your hands—all are silent signals of credibility and candor. Individuals with open gestures are perceived more positively and are more persuasive than those with closed gestures (for example, arms crossed, hands hidden or held close to the body).

**Lean in slightly.** Leaning forward shows you’re interested in the other person. But be respectful of his space. That means, in most business situations, staying about two feet away.

**Synchronize your body language with that of the person with whom you are dealing.** Subtly match her stance, arm positions, and facial expressions. When talking with someone we like or are interested in, we naturally switch our body posture to match that of the other person. Mirroring a person’s nonverbal behavior is a signal that you are engaged.

Of course, managing your own body language is only one side of the nonverbal coin. Equally important is the ability to accurately decode the silent signals of others. Peter Drucker, the renowned author,

professor, and management consultant, understood this clearly. “The most important thing in communication,” he once said, “is hearing what isn’t said.”

The good news about reading body language is that our brains are hard-wired to respond instantly (and subconsciously) to nonverbal cues. The bad news: that circuitry was put in place a long time ago, when our ancestors faced threats and challenges very different from those we face in modern society.

Life is more complex today, with layers of social restrictions and nuanced meanings adding to the intricacies of our interpersonal dealings. Reading body language takes more than a dictionary of gestures. It also takes an understanding of how identical gestures change meaning under different circumstances. You can improve your accuracy by filtering your first impressions through the five “Cs”—context, clusters, congruence, consistency, and culture.

**Context.** The meaning of nonverbal communication changes as the context changes. Location, the formality or informality of the setting, and the occasion are part of the context. When people interact, their relationship determines much of the context. The same man talking with a client, his boss, or a subordinate may display very different body language with each.

Time of day, expectations based on past encounters, and whether the interaction is taking place in a private or public setting all need to be taken into consideration when you evaluate meaning. The key is to judge if the nonverbal behaviors are appropriate for the context in which they occur.

**Clusters.** Nonverbal cues occur in what is called a “gesture cluster”—a group of movements, postures, and actions that reinforce a common point.

A person may cross her arms for any number of reasons, but when the gesture is coupled with a scowl, a headshake, and legs turned away from you, you now have a composite picture and reinforcement to conclude that she is resistant to whatever you just proposed. Always remember to look for groups, or clusters, of behavior.

**Congruence.** When a person believes what they are saying, you see it corroborated by

the alignment of their body language to the spoken word. You also see incongruence, where gestures contradict words.

Your boss tells you that you’ll be considered for a promotion. But if she’s leaning back with crossed arms and a forced smile, she’s sending the opposite message. Your customer may say he’s not interested in the deal you’re presenting. But if he keeps glancing at the contract on the table, he’s telling you that he is interested.

**Consistency.** You need to know a person’s baseline behavior under relaxed or generally stress-free conditions so that you can compare it with the expressions and gestures that appear when that person is under stress.

So, when you interact with your business colleagues, notice how they look when they are relaxed and comfortable. Note their eye contact, gestures, and body postures. Knowing someone’s behavioral baseline enhances your ability to spot meaningful inconsistencies.

**Culture.** Basically, there are two kinds of body language signals: acquired and instinctive. Acquired gestures are socially generated, so identical gestures often have different meanings among different societies. Few of us are aware of our own cultural biases because cultural imprinting begins at a very early age.

And while some of a culture’s nonverbal behaviors are taught explicitly, most of them are absorbed subconsciously.

I’ve found that savvy professionals are not looking to be light years ahead of the competition, but they’d love to gain a slight edge. Well, the evidence is in—people with great body language skills gain the nonverbal advantage.

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**Carol Kinsey Goman** is the author of *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*; [CGoman@CKG.com](mailto:CGoman@CKG.com).

Send submissions to *Development, T+D*, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; [jllorensi@astd.org](mailto:jllorensi@astd.org).

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