

Body Language – Your First Language **By Linda Allen**

Body language is your first language. Although we all “speak” it, we don’t always understand its subtleties and nuances. It’s true that our actions speak louder than our words, and sometimes our body language “shouts” so loudly it overrides our message and confuses our audience.

Whether you are a speaker with an audience or simply meeting someone for the first time, your body language can attract or offend and ultimately determine the future of the relationship. A lot rides on that first impression – and it happens quickly.

Within 30 seconds, you can make a charming or alarming impression, according to Gloria Starr of Global Success Strategies, Inc. A communications and leadership coach and advisor, she says that people generally decide within mere seconds of meeting someone whether or not they like that person.

Charismatic or charming people use welcoming body language such as a smile, direct eye contact and good posture. Their movements are slow and fluid, which makes people feel comfortable. They introduce themselves immediately, shake hands and make conversation by asking open-ended questions.

In contrast, alarming behaviors that create barriers between people include avoiding eye contact, crossing one’s arms and making rapid, nervous or jerky movements and hand gestures. Much of our body language is unconscious. We’re often not aware of what or why we do what we do. Eyes, hands, and posture provide volumes of personal information about people.

You can easily establish a connection and rapport with another person. Use *mirroring* to create a sense of commonality and shared values and interests. As the word suggests, mirroring is copying the body language of another person, but without being obvious, manipulative or insulting. Mirroring can range from copying facial expressions and breathing rate to posture and gestures.

Body language is contagious. You can inspire and empower your audience or you can discourage, antagonize and alienate them. Speakers who are comfortable with their body language are better able to adapt to a new audience and stage. Their presence, gestures, and words claim and control both.

A large stage space can diminish a person’s presence, so more movement and larger gestures help the audience focus on the speaker. The savvy speaker always makes gestures fit the topic and tone of the speech and knows that too many gestures distract from the message.

Even when you’re not speaking, your body language continues the conversation like a silent partner. You want this partner to work for you and not against you. With study and practice, you can learn how to match your body language to your speech:

- **Be a people watcher.** You don't have to eavesdrop or stare. Just watch their body language and try to determine what messages they seem to be sending.
- **Watch the professionals.** Turn the audio down on TV programs or movies and try to guess the conversation and storyline.
- **Make the most of your Toastmasters Club experience.** Ask fellow toastmasters to identify any body language that distracts from your speech and message.
- **See yourself as others see you.** Practice speaking in front of a mirror, or videotape a speech to identify distracting behavior.

Body language is two-way communication. Not only does your audience read your messages, they provide feedback on their attention and understanding. People leaning forward are interested and getting your message. But if people are leaning back in their seats, fidgeting, talking, or texting, they're probably bored or upset, or the speech is too long. It's a signal to change the message or the pace.

With study and practice, you can become comfortable whether meeting people or delivering a public speech by matching your body language to your words to create a positive lasting impression.

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