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Body Talk

By Mitchell Stephenson

In the 1960s, Dr. Albert Mehrabian released two studies on communication.^{1,2} He found that there are three important elements of communication: (1) body language, (2) tone of voice, and (3) spoken words. When all three are consistent, people listen to the words. When they are not consistent, people place far more attention—**55 percent**—on body language than they do on spoken words—only 7 percent.

Making sure that your body language sends the message that you want takes work. This article offers some tips to maximize the impact of your body language.

BE AWARE OF YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

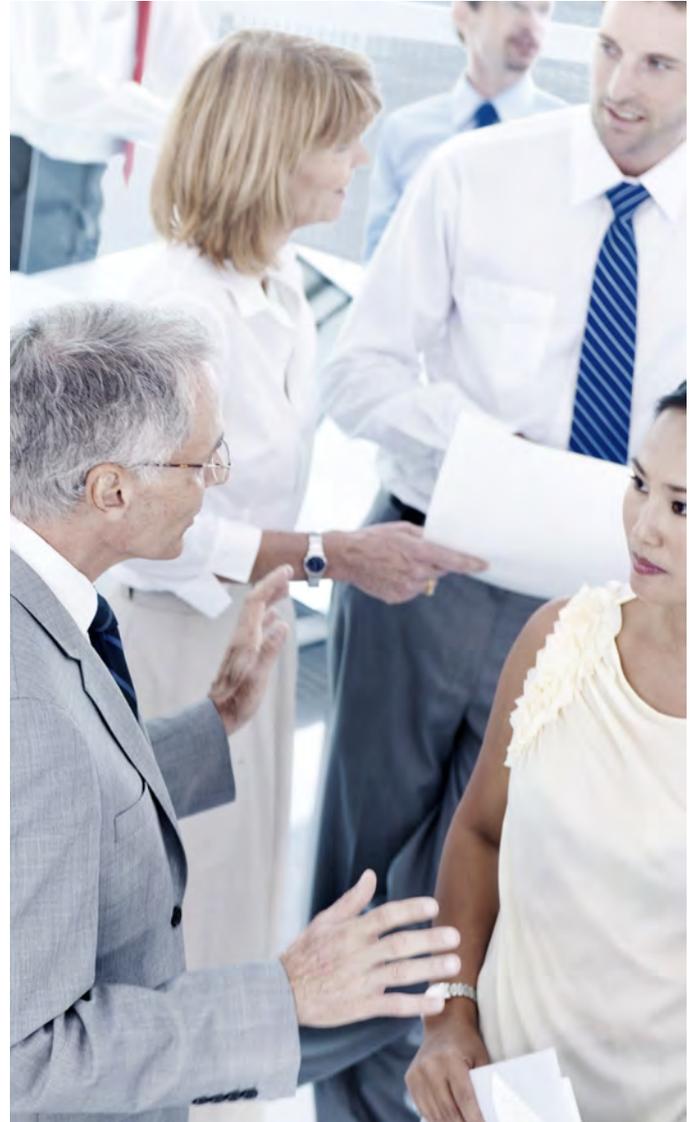
Hall of fame basketball coach Pat Summitt said, “We communicate all the time, even when we don’t realize it. Be aware of body language.”³ It’s important to always remember this.

For example, to give your audience confidence that you are open-minded and receptive, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, shoulders back, and head up, and make eye contact when someone is speaking with you. This will encourage your audience to be more honest and forthcoming.

Doing the converse—crossing your arms and tilting your head sideways when someone is speaking with you—will likely give the impression that you are close-minded and not receptive, whether you intend it or not. Simply **being aware** of your body language will help you to adjust and correct it, to have the desired effect on the interaction.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

If you see someone exhibiting body language that you want to emulate, copy it. You may feel like an imposter for a while, but



if it works for you, it will become part of your normal gestures and will feel more natural. If it doesn’t work, you will simply stop using it.

The key is being willing to take a risk and feel awkward while trying something new. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy sums it up nicely in her TED Talk *Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are*: “Don’t fake it ’til you make it. Fake it ’til you become it.”⁴

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

It is important to practice a process in which you seek to replace negative body language with positive. For example, having an open, upright posture in a meeting will signal attentiveness and alertness. If you naturally slouch, it will take time to change your habit. In a 2009 University College London study,⁵ researchers found that forming a new habit can take anywhere from 18 to 254 days. Whether on the short or long end of the time spectrum, it simply takes practice and perseverance to make a change in your body language permanent.

If you remember to focus on, seek to improve and change your body language so that it sends the signals you intend, it can have a profound impact on your interactions with others. This is true for your interactions in both a professional and a personal setting. No matter how carefully you choose what you say, give just as much consideration to how you communicate it. Heed the words of comedian Ricky Gervais, who said, “Body language is more powerful than words.”⁶ ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Mehrabian, A., and M. Wiener. 1967. Decoding of Inconsistent Communications. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6:109–114.
- 2 Mehrabian, Albert, and Susan R. Ferris. 1967. Inference of Attitudes From Non-verbal Communication in Two Channels. *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31, no. 3:248–252.
- 3 Summitt, Pat. 1998. *Reach for the Summit: The Definite Dozen System for Succeeding at Whatever You Do*. With Sally Jenkins. New York; Three Rivers Press.
- 4 Cuddy, Amy. 2012. Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are. June 2012. Presented at: TEDGlobal 2012. https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are/transcript (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 5 Lally, P., C.H.M. van Jaarsveld, H.W.W. Potts, and J. Wardle. 2010. How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6:998–1009.
- 6 Ghost Town—Ricky Gervais Interview. Interview with Rob Carnevale. *IndieLondon*. n.d. <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/ghost-town-ricky-gervais-interview> (accessed May 15, 2020).