

Do You Speak Body Language?

By Anne Warfield

The other day, a salesperson told me she would do whatever it took to make me happy—and that really ticked me off!

Why? Shouldn't I be thrilled at her offer? I wasn't, because her words didn't match her body language. As she talked, she placed her hands on her hips, stood with her legs apart, and looked down at me. Her stance came off as, "Lady, you really are being a pain, so what will it take to get rid of you?"

That salesperson will probably never know why she lost a customer. The lesson is that people will listen more to your body language than to your words. So, think about whether your body language matches what you say.

From 65 to 90 percent of every conversation is interpreted through body language, says Ray Birdswhistell, professor of research in anthropology at Temple University and author of numerous books on body language. We react more to what we think someone meant than to the words he or she said.

If someone tells you, "You're doing a great job!" with a smile on her face and a relaxed body, you'll probably believe her. On the other hand, if that person says, "You're doing a great job!" with gritted teeth, a half smile, and a stiff body, you may be unsure about the true message. Most likely, you'll feel that you aren't working up to par, but you won't be sure why.

Voice tone is another important part of body language that sends a message. By varying the tone of certain words, we change the meaning of our statements and questions.

For example, take the statement, "I didn't tell her to come to the party." Saying, "I didn't tell her to come to the party" suggests that someone else told her to come. Saying, "I didn't *tell* her to come to the party" insinuates that you may have suggested she come, but you didn't tell her to. Saying, "I didn't tell *her* to come to the party" implies that you told someone else to come to the party. "I didn't tell her to come to the *party*" indicates that you told her to come to another event. As you can see, the tone of certain words results in different interpretations.

Tone of voice is especially important in customer service. If you interact with customers frequently, you need to be aware of the message you're conveying. Do you do everything possible to help customers, or does your voice tell them to move on so you can help the next person? A client of mine has a plaque in his office that states, "The phone is not an interruption of your work. It is the reason you are here."

Talk the walk

If you're a manager, it's imperative that you be aware of your body signals and tone to ensure that they correspond with your message. For example, if you shift your eyes and look away while speak-

ing, people won't trust your message. If you raise your voice in a questioning tone while giving out quotas, you'll sound as though you don't believe they're achievable.

I once worked with a manager whose department had a terrible morale problem. He had asked his staff what they wanted from him. They requested that he drop by their offices once in a while and also schedule regular meetings with them. The manager did both, but the morale got worse.

When I came in to study the situation, I found that the man's body language was causing all of the problems. It was domineering. When he dropped into people's offices, he'd take up the whole doorway or walk up to their desks and look them in the eye—even if they were on the phone! People found his behavior unnerving. It sent the message that their personal space belonged to him. At meetings, the manager would place his hands behind his head, cross his legs, lean back, and look at the ceiling. That body language said that he already had all of the answers.

After I pointed out what messages his body language was sending, the manager changed his behavior and boosted everyone's morale.

If you could hear what I see

As that manager learned, your body language can send a message about you. Do you want to be perceived as a good listener? Make eye contact, smile, nod

occasionally during a conversation, and tilt your head toward the speaker. If you shift your eyes and body, make eye contact less than 50 percent of the time, sigh, or fidget, you'll seem as if you're not paying attention.

If you want to be seen as a leader, you'll need to stand up straight, make eye contact, and smile. Those signals project confidence and energy. On the other hand, if you walk with your shoulders slumped and head down, speak in a flat tone, and fidget often, you'll likely be seen as indecisive, negative, or inexperienced.

How you are perceived is up to you. So, reflect on the messages you send every day to co-workers and friends. Ask someone you trust what your body language says about you. You might be surprised at how much you say without speaking a word!

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Read the Signs

Body language is a crucial communication tool, yet few people understand how to read it accurately. Here's a beginning dictionary of body signs and their possible meanings.

Clenched hands The higher the hands go, the more frustrated the person is. **Crossed arms and legs** Defensive, protective. Doesn't mean the person is tuning you out, but can mean that he or she is filtering information. **Picking off imaginary lint** Person disapproves of an attitude or opinion stated, yet feels constrained in offering his or her opinion. **Rubbing at eyes** Lying. When telling a big lie, a woman will tend to rub lightly and look at the ceiling; a man will rub vigorously and look at the floor. **Scratching at neck** When people suspect they'll be caught in a lie, they often scratch the back of the neck five times. **Placing of hand on cheek** Evaluation and interest. **Placing of hand on chin with thumb under chin** Genuine interest, but with some negative thoughts or doubts. **Nodding of head** Women often nod to say, "I am listening to you"; men tend to nod only when they agree with you.

Source published works of body language experts Ray Birdwhistell, Desmond Morris, Allan Pease, and others