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Making the Most Of Your Intuition

BY LAURA
L'HERISSON

Remember the last time you had an appointment that ended with the ambiguous statement: "We'll get back to you." Even though you couldn't put a finger on why, you knew whether or not you would be contacted. Your intuition told you what to expect, and you were right.

Intuition has rarely been included as part of sales training, yet it is a skill which can "make or break" a sales person. If its validity and importance were understood, it would become a focal part of sales training. To, most people, intuition implies guesswork, and one who has good intuition has an uncanny ability to guess correctly. The dictionary fails to mention chance, but defines intuition as "instantaneous or immediate learning or knowing without conscious use of reason."

Intuition has an instant quality which is often crucial since sales representatives are frequently forced to make snap judgments and to form snap impressions of people after minimal contact with them. However, just because intuition occurs "in a snap" doesn't mean it is a simple or a single process. Our intuitions about people are based on our unconscious interpretation of the non-verbal messages they send. As Lowen (1969) stated: "Our intuitive response to a person is determined by how we sense his bodily

qualities. The look in a person's eyes, the tone of his voice, the expression of his mouth, the warmth of his handshake, the way he carries himself, the degree of his vivacity and spontaneity are not only signs that tell us who he is; they are the factors that determine our unconscious or feeling reaction to him."

We sort a large volume of non-verbal information in a very limited amount of time.

A problem with storing this information on an unconscious level is that we're never sure of its accuracy. To explain a feeling about someone by saying, "Well, I just have a hunch that . . ." lacks substance and is hard to justify. However, when we understand the basis of our intuition and translate it into conscious awareness, we can evaluate and accept that information. Understanding intuition maximizes sales effectiveness by increasing personal self-confidence and sensitivity to clients' needs. As we understand our own non-verbal style better, we can learn to control the messages we send out.

The most expressive part of the body is the face. Usually we can tell when people feel strong emotions by the looks on their faces. But we learn to control facial expressions, and we use them to mask true feelings. In a scene from the movie *All That Jazz*, for example, the main character stood in front of a mirror and examined his bloodshot eyes. Then he downed

several "uppers," loaded his eyes with drops, slapped his cheeks, smiled knowingly as he snapped his fingers and announced to his reflection, "Showtime!"

This article points to some key components of the valid non-verbal information base which is especially relevant in sales situations. Since facial expressions are somewhat less reliable, the focus will be a body language. Body Language is less studied, as a general rule, and is a better indicator of internal feelings. As Shakespeare noted in *The Winter's Tale*, "There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture."

The way we move across a room gives lasting first impressions of our self-concept, our strength and our intent. The muscle tone and tension displayed in our movements reflect our attitudes and styles of thinking. To illustrate these points, imagine watching two individuals who are the same sex, age, size and weight. The first stands erect and walks briskly, "covering ground." The second saunters along with a slight slouch. The packages they present and the responses they elicit are both markedly different.

We may not always be aware of our posture and the way we move, but those who observe us are. In fact, one sales manager confided in me that he knew by the way an applicant walked into his office whether he'd eventually hire the applicant. He contended he could

predict work habits and style by the way the applicant walked.

Whether an individual's work habits can be predicted from a walk is debatable, but the strength of that initial impression is not. An efficient and purposeful walk is brisk and directed toward a destination. It originates from a center of gravity in the torso.

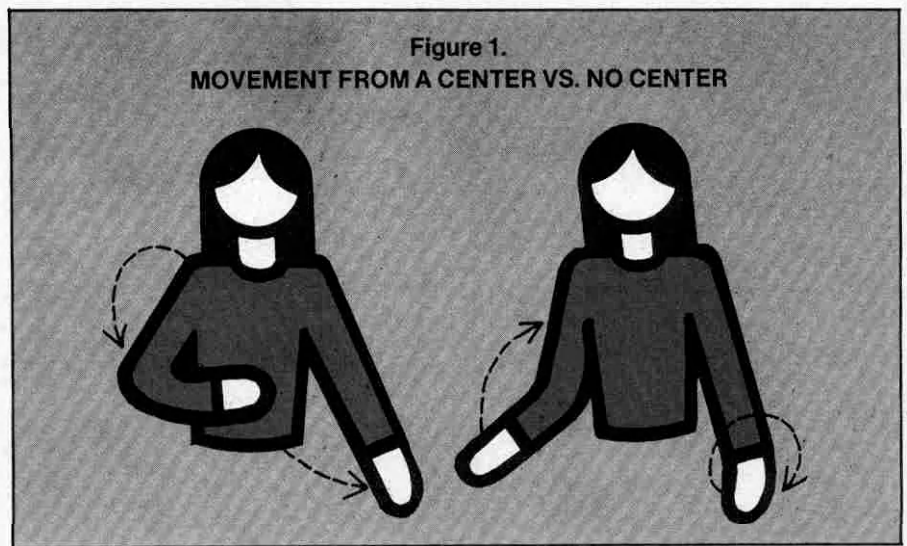
The concept of a center of gravity from which movements originate is important. We all have a center located somewhere in our torso. It's located slightly higher in males than in females because of differences in weight and muscle distribution, but it's there. Movements which originate from our center convey an image that is cohesive, balanced and believable. In contrast, movements which do not originate at the body's center are less purposeful, less authoritative and less believable.

The simple act of pointing illustrates the difference between centered and uncentered movement. The centered movement begins by tightening and lifting the shoulder muscles which direct the upper arm. Movement in the upper arm then directs the forearm, followed by the wrist and the fingers. The movement flows continuously from the body out to the fingers. In contrast, the uncentered movement begins with either the wrist or the forearm and is followed by the fingers. The movement is localized from the elbow down. You should be able to feel the difference in the two types of movement. One involves your body as a unit while the other involves part of your arm. Figure 1 illustrates these types of movements.

As sales trainees learn presentation skills, they should be taught to move and gesture from their body's center of gravity. Females, in particular, may have difficulty developing movements which are consistently centered because in their youth many learned stereotyped female gestures, from the extremities inward. The advantage of cultivating centered movement is a subtle but noticeable increase in apparent conviction, believability, self-confidence and authority.

Gestures

Gestures are the smaller movements we use to transmit rather



specific information. They may accompany and accentuate speech or be used alone. Some gestures have almost universal meanings, such as the head shake for "no," while others have regional meanings. Others are distinctively our own and reveal a great deal about our personality and our mood. Gestures have different meanings in different contexts. Here are some keys which, once understood can be used spontaneously in sales situations.

Gestural Frequency: Bonoma and Felder (1977) found that the infrequent use of gestures indicated either a negative attitude toward another person or a disinterest in the subject matter.² Frequent use of gestures indicated positive, accepting attitudes toward another person.

During a sales presentation, much of the talking and much of the gesturing are done by the sales person. When gestures are appropriate,

centered and spontaneous, they help create a positive, receptive climate for the presentation. If at all possible, sales training should include the videotaping of sales presentation. Taping allows trainees to critique and develop their personal gestural language.

Gestural Areas: Gestures occur in two basic areas. Those areas are illustrated in Figure 2. One is called the safe area, and the other is called risky area. The safe area is circumscribed by the torso and runs from the shoulders down the sides to just below the belt line. Individuals whose gestures are confined to the safe area are typically security-motivated, conventional rule-followers, and low-risk takers. By contrast, individuals who gesture outside the safe area are more extroverted, less confined by convention, and bigger risk takers.

Understanding the safe versus

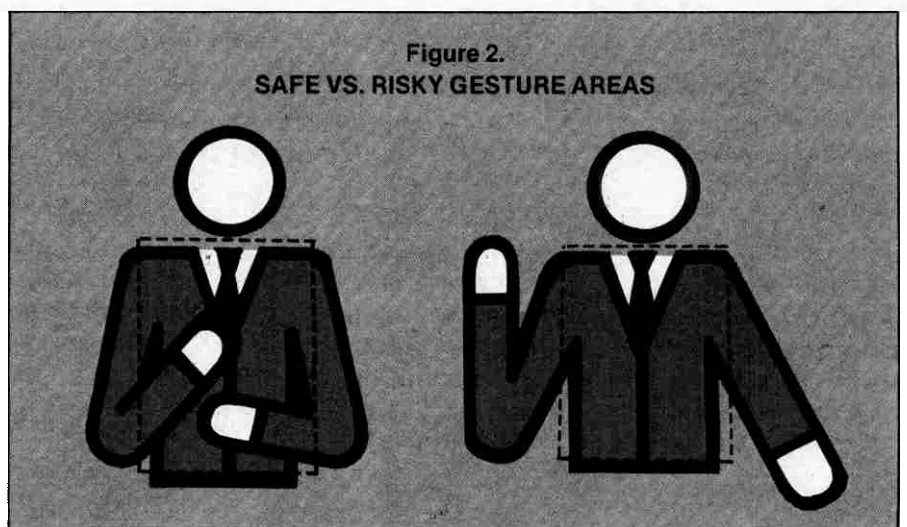
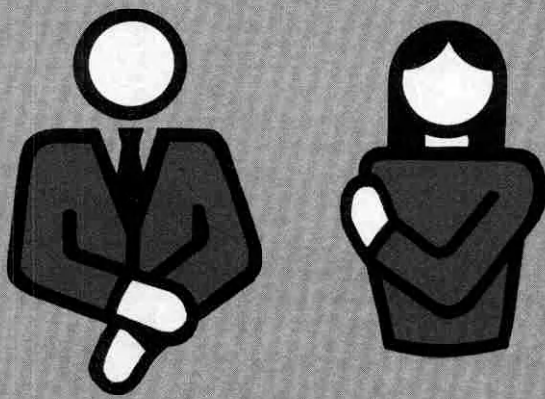


Figure 3.
BODY CROSS



risky gesture areas has important implications for sales. The conventional, security-motivated client is far more likely to want detailed product explanations and cost analyses than the risk-taking client. The risk-taker is more likely to want minimal detail in favor of "What does it cost? What does it do? Why is it better than its competitors?" By being sensitive to both types of client needs, a sales person can adapt his or her style of selling to maximize interpersonal effectiveness.

Body Cross: The body cross is a gesture which has rather specific implications in sales. It involves forming a temporary protective barrier in front of the body with one or both arms. It may be disguised as a grooming behavior, such as adjusting a handbag or watchband, or checking a cuff link. It may also be expressed more overtly by folding the arms in front of the chest, as illustrated in

Figure 3. The body cross is almost always performed when a newcomer or visitor enters another person's office. Its message is, "I am nervous but I will not retreat"³ (Morris, 1977, p. 135). It signals that the visitor is aware of entering another's territory and that the host's dominance is not being challenged. Its primary function is to help reduce the tension of an initial meeting.

An important thing to remember about the body cross is that it is usually performed and perceived unconsciously, but it has a significant effect on the initial tone of a sales interview. Unfortunately, some sales trainers attempt to remove all of the trainees' "nervous" mannerisms, including subtle body crosses disguised as grooming behaviors. Leaving those mannerisms intact could actually facilitate the interview.

Touching

Most of us touch ourselves most

of the time, at least when we're seated or resting and not moving from place to place. We touch ourselves by resting our heads in our hands, scratching our heads, rubbing our foreheads or our hands, stroking our beards, straightening our hair, resting our hands on our crossed ankles or knees. The point is that we touch ourselves constantly and unconsciously.

Morris (1977) explained that self-touching is comforting because it simulates being touched by someone else. Touching may also be explained by cybernetics. By touching ourselves, we complete a feedback loop indicating all is well within us. Regardless of interpretation, self-touching calms us and helps us stay in contact with our internal feelings.

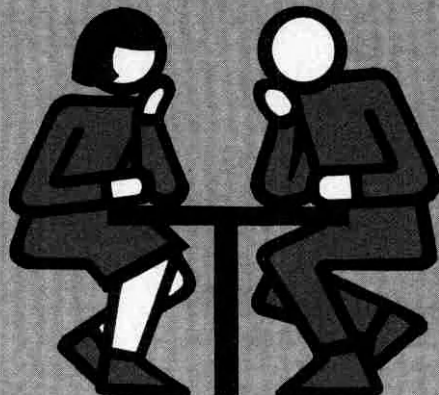
Teaching trainees to notice self-touching is important. Whether or not a person touches him or herself is an effective indicator of that person's anxiety level. When our anxiety increases, we lose touch with ourselves, both literally and symbolically, and we easily become defensive. The reverse is also true: as our anxiety decreases, we get back in touch with ourselves. By using self-touching as a guide, a sales person can be sensitive to a client's tension level and to changes in that level. Self-touching can indicate that the presentation should be accelerated or slowed down. The sales person can also learn to calm his/her personal anxieties by learning to be in touch.

Mirroring

Mirroring is a technique which is especially helpful in developing and refining intuitive skills. Mirroring occurs naturally when two friends talk and one unconsciously assumes, either partially or totally, the body postures and positions of the other, as illustrated in Figure 4. The more precise the mirroring the greater the empathy and agreement experienced by the two friends, and the more likely that the two will move the same way at the same time. That is, when one changes positions, the other will soon follow.

Mirroring occurs spontaneously in our everyday interactions. But for the most part, it goes unnoticed. We sit in positions similar

Figure 4.
MIRRORING



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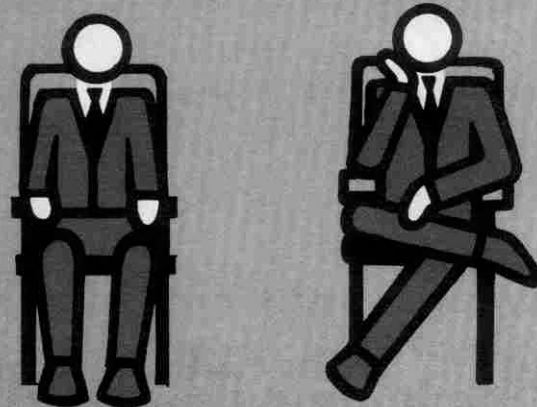
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Figure 5.
SYMMETRY VS. ASYMMETRY



to our bosses'; lovers across tables lean in the same direction; and friends sitting next to us cross their legs in the same direction as ours. As our awareness of mirroring increases, we can use the technique to our advantage. Specifically, in sales we can get a better understanding of our clients' internal moods by mirroring them, *albeit judiciously*. (Obviously, if a client sits in a sprawled, semi-reclining position, we should not mirror him!) Discrete mirroring enhances communication by putting the other person at ease.

A young insurance agent has supplied one example of how mirroring can be used. He had a couple of appointments one day with two dissimilar individuals who were employed by the same company and had the same ranks. The agent had essentially presented his materials twice, in almost identical ways, with very different results. After reviewing the cases with him, I asked him to reconstruct the way each of his prospects had been sitting, and to tell me how each felt. One prospect sat erect, with legs open, arms braced on chair arms, in a highly symmetrical fashion. The second prospect sat with his head on his hand, one leg crossed over the other one, and his hand resting on his thigh. His sitting position was comfortably balanced but asymmetrical. These two positions are illustrated in Figure 5. After mirroring his clients' postures, the agent was able to differentiate their tension levels and their needs for struc-

ture. He decided to use different styles of presentations for each of them in subsequent calls, and eventually closed both sales.

Understanding and Awareness

Intuition is a skill which enables us to make instantaneous and valid decisions based on largely unconscious interpretations of nonverbal cues. Like any skill, it can be developed and refined; and its development should be a key component of any comprehensive sales training program. The basis for developing intuition lies in helping us understand its components and how they work. Understanding leads to awareness. The awareness which a powerful and effective sales-training program provides can help create a climate of confidence where the expected happens.

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