

How to Improve Your Body Language

Sharon discussed her book and the importance of good body language with the editors of the *CAM Report*.

Q. Can you tell us about your book?

A. The theme of my book is how your nonverbal communication shapes your reality and has a direct impact on your success.

Recently, Sue came to me with a question. She said, “Sharon, why does everyone say, ‘Why are you always so critical, you always judge me!’?” Sue was stumped. Yet, people make snap judgments about us the moment they see us and those judgments have a direct impact on the jobs you get, the pay you receive, and the success you have. Sue didn’t think of herself as a critical person, and once I spent time with her I realized she wasn’t judging others. It was Sue’s body language habits that were sending the wrong message.

What Your Body Says (And How To Master The Message) shows you how to become consciously aware of the messages you send and what to do when you hear comments you don’t understand, like Sue did. The book gives you the tools and tactics to send a clear message the first time.

In Sue’s case, she had developed the habit of furrowing her brow and wrinkling her forehead every time she went into deep thought. This habit was just that, a habit she had developed when she would “go inside” to look for answers. She was not being critical or judgmental. Yet, everyone assumed she was, so she was being treated as if she was. Take a moment, I’ll wait, go look in the mirror, furrow your brow, and wrinkle your forehead. What’s the first judgment about that facial expression that comes to your mind?

I wrote *What Your Body Says (And How To Master The Message)* because there are only two things a person has real control over: your thoughts and your actions. When you know how to send the messages you want to send and how to avoid those body language habits that are sending a less-than-positive message, you are in control of how you are perceived, and ultimately your success.

When the communication is critical, the key is to prepare. Your success all comes down to what the other person thinks you are—not what or who you really are—not fair, but true.

Q. What are some major do's and don'ts regarding body language?

A. The number one nonverbal I see done wrong is one that most people scoff at when they first hear me mention it. Yet, once you master it, it is the most powerful way to make a positive impression and feel self-confident, every time.

It is to breathe slowly, comfortably, and fully! I know, it sounds silly. However when nervous, we often breathe rapid and shallow. This causes a number of snap judgments and unconscious responses in other people.

Shallow or rapid breathing activates your and others' fight or flight responses. This response automatically puts others on the defensive and they don't even know why. Most importantly, it impairs your cognitive response time because you are not getting enough oxygen to your brain.

Do a little experiment. Quickly sniff (short rapid inhales through the nose) five times. What are you feeling right now? Most people feel a twinge of anxiety or anxiousness. That is the beginning of the fight or- flight response.

Breathing, while natural, isn't always easy to control. You can tell yourself to breathe low, full, complete breaths as you go face the board of directors, but the nervous system frequently takes over. Many times, you may not even be aware that your breathing has become rapid and shallow until you find yourself searching for words or feeling as though you can't think clearly.

Breathing patterns are contagious; take care not to let yourself be affected by another person's rapid or shallow breathing.

In addition to your breathing, be aware of your habitual facial movements and expressions. Not only can they send an unintended message, but they often affect your voice tone. How often have you heard a smile over the phone?

Your facial expressions will determine how your voice is heard. For example, if you drop your chin on the last words of every sentence, when you're asking for cooperation, people will do so begrudgingly, because they heard something that sounded like an order. The reverse is true as well: if you are nodding your head up and down, your voice will have a "sing-songy" sound. Giving advice with that tone is not recommended, as most people will think your advice is not sound. A voice pattern that ends on the up tone sounds as if you are asking a question, thus giving the impression you are unsure. However, this voice pattern is perfect for getting people to share and build rapport.

To make an even more notable first impression, keep your mouth closed and breathe through your nose during the pause; only open your mouth when you are ready to speak. Don't fill the air with sounds of um, ah, uh, or words such as like and you know. Meaningless extra syllables, known as verbal pauses, are distracting and others perceive you as being unintelligent, unsure, or untrustworthy.

If you are worried about someone jumping in and speaking over you or before you are done, gesture while you are speaking to visually reinforce your message, then freeze the gesture during your pause. The frozen gesture indicates you are not done speaking.

Q. What are some surprising things people do in terms of body language that affect their chances of landing a job and/or being successful in the workplace?

A. First, know your intention for the communication before going into any situation. When speaking, remember a short, succinct message sounds confident. If you can't say your opening comments in under 100 words, which are about 30 seconds, re-script your message. Then use body language that shows you are taking the lead. As I mentioned before, begin with comfortable, full breathing. This shows that you are in control of yourself and comfortable in the situation. Next, show you are confident with good posture. Good posture is easy if you keep your chin parallel to the ground.

Many job-seekers are led to believe it all starts with a firm handshake. The quality of the handshake is important, but your posture shows your confidence (or lack thereof) before your handshake. Grandma was right, stand tall.

Standing or sitting straight when combined with comfortable, full breathing will cause your body to adopt a very slight relaxed stature, making others feel at ease in your presence. Straight posture with rapid, shallow breathing looks frantic, aloof, or distracted.

Always maintain appropriate eye contact. It is often suggested to maintain direct eye contact, as it can be a nonverbal signal of confidence; yet, be careful, too much eye contact can be an emotionally charged non-verbal [cue]. Eye contact ranges from indirect to direct, and knowing how much is too much or too little varies with the culture, gender, and context.

Eye contact works best when both parties feel it's "just right"; so take your cues from the other person and match his or her preference for how much direct eye contact to use.

Done right, the combination of full breathing, consistent, not constant eye contact, and good posture, including your chin parallel to the ground, will allow you to be seen as confident and capable.

About Sharon Sayler, MBA, ACC, CE

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