

The Silent Language of Leadership

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The chief executive officer of an oil company showed up at a refinery in a designer suit and tie to discuss the firm's affairs with rank-and-file operators, electricians, and members of the warehouse staff -- dressed in their blue, fire-retardant overalls.

After being introduced and walking carefully to the front of the room, he removed his wristwatch (let's call it a Rolex) and quite visibly placed it on the lectern. The unspoken message: "I'm a very important man, I don't like coming into dirty places like this, and I have exactly 20 minutes to spend with you."

That message was, you understand, quite different from the words he actually used to begin his comments: "I'm happy to be with you today."

Which do you think those refinery workers believed . . . the CEO's spoken words or what his body language said?

We continue to find out more and more about how body language affects the messages we're trying to send. Consider, for example, the fields of psychology, neurobiology, criminology, and sociology. We don't normally associate them with advances in communication research, but evidence from these fields has given nonverbal communication scientific credence. And one of the findings from evolutionary psychology is that our brains are "hard-wired" to respond to nonverbal signals -- even though most of us aren't consciously aware of the process.

Here's what one researcher discovered: A classic study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at UCLA found that the *total impact* of a message is based on only 7 percent of the words used. Much more important are facial expressions (responsible for 55 percent of the total impact of the message), tone of voice (38 percent), and other forms of body language.

Obviously, you can't watch a person speaking in a foreign language and understand 93 percent of what is being communicated. Mehrabian was only studying the communication of *feelings* -- particularly, the feelings of *liking* and *disliking*. Still, you can bet that, when the verbal and nonverbal channels of communication are out of sync, most people (those refinery workers, for example) will tend to rely on the nonverbal message and disregard the verbal content.

All leaders express enthusiasm, warmth, and confidence -- as well as arrogance, indifference, and displeasure through their facial expressions, gestures, touch, and use of space. If an executive wants to be perceived as credible and forthright, he or she has got to think "outside the speech" and recognize the importance of *nonverbal* communication.

It is especially crucial for leaders to communicate congruently -- that is, to align the

spoken word with body language that supports (instead of sabotages) an intended message. When nonverbal messages conflict with your verbal messages, the people you are talking to become confused. Mixed signals have a negative effect on performance and make it almost impossible to build relationships of trust.

When a leader stands in front of a thousand employees and talks about how much he welcomes their input, the message gets derailed if that executive hides behind a lectern, or leans back *away* from his audience, or puts his hands behind his back, or shoves them in his pockets, or folds his arms across his chest. All of those send *closed* nonverbal signals – when the intended message is really about *openness*.

Then there is the matter of timing. If a leader's gestures are produced before or as the words come out, she appears open and candid. However, if she speaks first and then gestures (as I have seen many executives do) it's perceived as a contrived movement. And at that point, the validity of whatever is said comes under suspicion.

Nonverbal communication also plays a critical role in making sure the work force truly receives and understands key messages. If a leader is going to talk about new initiatives, major change, strategic opportunities -- or if he/she has to deliver bad news -- my advice is to do so in person. Every research report on employee communications presents one consistent conclusion: Face-to-face communications is the employee's medium of choice. This is because in face-to-face encounters, our brains process a continual cascade of nonverbal cues that we use as the basis for building trust and professional intimacy -- both of which are critical to high-level collaboration, persuasion, and communication.

And if they can't see their leader in person, employees want to view the next best thing. Consider the case with one Fortune 25 company, where teleconferences provided an ongoing opportunity for small groups of employees to get up close and personal with the CEO. Time after time, employees would ask about policies or pending organizational changes that had already been communicated in various company publications and through dozens of email announcements.

After the meetings, the beleaguered CEO would ask his communication manager, "How many times have we told them about that? Why don't they *know* that?"

"Oh, they know it," the communications manager would reply. "They just want to hear it from *you*. More importantly, they want to be able to *look* at you when you say it."

There is no doubt that you can gain a professional advantage by learning how to use nonverbal communication more effectively. Getting out from behind the lectern so the audience can see your entire body, fully facing the audience, making eye contact, keeping your movements relaxed and natural, standing tall, using open arm gestures, showing the palms of your hands -- all are silent signals of credibility and candor. And a good coach can help you find the gestures and facial expressions that are most congruent with the messages you want to convey.

But body language is more than a set of techniques. It is also a reflection of a person's internal state. In fact, the more someone tries to control emotions, the more likely they are to leak out nonverbally.

Here's a recent example: The corporate communicator who brought me into her company to coach an executive warned me that he was a "pretty crummy speaker." And, after watching him at a leadership conference, I was in total agreement. It wasn't his words -- they were carefully chosen and well rehearsed. It was, rather, how he looked when he spoke. Mechanical in all his gestures, this man's body was screaming: "I'm uncomfortable and unconvinced about everything I'm saying!"

The question: Could I help?

The answer: Not much.

Oh sure, I could find ways to make his movements less wooden and his timing more fluid. But if a person doesn't care about (or believe in) what he is saying, his gestures will automatically become lethargic and restricted. What the executive needed *most* was genuine enthusiasm and passion about the company's new strategic direction. Because what employee audiences *saw* when this business leader spoke was exactly how he really *felt!*

And, of course, learning to align body language with verbal messages is only one side of the nonverbal coin. The other side -- and here is where leaders can really set themselves apart -- is the ability to accurately read the nonverbal signals that employees and team members display.

Peter Drucker, the renowned author, professor and management consultant, understood this clearly. "The most important thing in communication," he once said, "is hearing what isn't said."

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