

## Presentation Skills: Body Language

### While You're Talking, What Is Your Body Saying?

**More than half of your impact as a speaker depends upon your body language.** You probably have control over the words you speak, but are you sure that you have control over what you are saying with your body language?

**Body language comprises gesture, stance, and facial expression.** These are all the more important when all eyes of an audience are upon you. When you are presenting, strong, positive body language becomes an essential tool in helping you build credibility, express your emotions, and connect with your listeners. It also helps your listeners focus more intently on you and what you're saying.

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The tricky thing about body language is that you are usually unaware of the messages you're conveying nonverbally. When presenters see themselves on videotape, they're often surprised to see that their body language conveyed an entirely different message from the one they had intended. For example, some people actually shake their heads "no" when they say "yes."

**Effective body language** supports the message and projects a strong image of the presenter. Audiences respond best to presenters whose bodies are alive and energetic. Audiences appreciate movement when it is meaningful and supportive of the message. The most effective movements are ones that reflect the presenter's personal investment in the message.

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Anyone can utter a series of words; it is the presenter's personal connection to those words that can bring them to life for the audience. Presenters who care deeply about their material tend to use their entire bodies to support the message. Their gestures are large enough to embrace the room full of people. They stand tall and lean into the audience right from their feet, as if trying to shorten the distance between their message and the ears of the audience. Their faces express their passion while their eyes connect with the audience, focusing on one person at a time.

**Gesture.** Do use your hands. They don't belong on your hips or in your pockets or folded across your chest either or held behind your back. Use them-to help emphasize a point, to express emotion, to release tension, and to engage your audience.

Most people have a gestural vocabulary at their disposal. Anyone can all think of a gesture that supports words such as "short" or "tall;" however, the gestures of everyday conversation tend to be too small and often too low to use in front of a large audience. Presenters need to scale their gestures to the size of the room. The most effective gestures arise from the shoulder, not the wrist or elbow. Shoulder gestures project better across the distance and release more of the presenter's energy, helping combat any tension that can build in the upper body (particularly under pressure).

**Stance.** How you stand in front of the room speaks before open your mouth. Your stance can tell the audience that you're happy, scared, confident, or uncomfortable. Audiences "read" these messages unthinkingly but unfailingly. Stance speaks. A balanced stance with weight even but slightly forward tends to say that the speaker is engaged with the audience. A slumped stance leaning to one side can says the speaker doesn't care.

The feet should point straight ahead, not quite shoulder-width apart. When not gesturing, the hands should sit quietly at the sides of the presenter. Letting the hands fall to the sides between gestures projects ease. These moments of stillness between gestures also have the effect of amplifying the gestures. Yes, you can move around, but remember to punctuate that movement with stillness. Constant motion, such as swaying, is a distraction that can annoy your listeners.

**Facial expression.** The movements of your eyes, mouth, and facial muscles can build a connection with your audience. Alternatively, they can undermine your every word. Eye focus is the most important element in this process. No part of your facial expression is more important in communicating sincerity and credibility. Nothing else so directly connects you to your listeners-whether in a small gathering or a large group. Effective presenters engage one person at a time, focusing long enough to complete a natural phrase and watch it sink in for a moment. This level of focus can rivet the attention of a room by drawing the eyes of each member of the audience and creating natural pauses between phrases. The pauses not only boost attention, but also contribute significantly to comprehension and retention by allowing the listener time to process the message.

The other elements of facial expression can convey the feelings of the presenter, anything from passion for the subject, to depth of concern for the audience. Unfortunately, under the pressure of delivering a group presentation, many people lose their facial expression. Their faces solidify into a grim, stone statue, a thin straight line where the lips meet. Try to unfreeze your face right from the start. For example, when you greet the audience, smile! You won't want to smile throughout the entire presentation, but at least at the appropriate moments. It's only on rare occasions that you may need to be somber and serious throughout.

### **Bring it all together**

While we all want to believe that it's enough to be natural in front of a room, it isn't really natural to stand up alone in front of a group of people. It's an odd and unusual thing that creates stress, tension, and stomach troubles. Being natural won't cut it. We need to be bigger, more expressive, and more powerful. It takes extra effort and energy. It also takes skill and practice. With so much depending on communication and communication depending on body language, it's worth getting it right. Work on your body language-gesture, stance, and facial expression-to make the most of every speaking opportunity.