

Body Language

A smile, a frown, or some other gesture may communicate more than the accompanying words. Some researchers believe that the bulk of the message during even apparently verbal communication is delivered via gestures and other body language. Whatever the mix, we tell others what we mean through not only words but also nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and posture.

When first asked if he could tackle the overhaul of a motor, a production crew member uttered words that he was looking forward to the challenge, but his facial expression conveyed, "I'm not sure I'm up to it." His observant foreman picked up on the mixed signals and was wise to discuss his perceptions with the worker: *"I know you said you were ready for your new assignment, but I get the feeling you aren't sure if you can do it."*

Because nonverbal communication, like verbal, is a two-way process, mastering it requires awareness of the signals given by one's own, as well as another's gestures and behavior. And most people are less conscious of nonverbal cues than words. Although gestures cannot be counted on to have universal meaning, many express attitudes common across cultural perspectives. For example, open arms or a forward lean usually indicate openness to others' ideas or feelings. Arms folded across the chest often indicate defensiveness or unwillingness to engage in discussion. A manager who leans far backward in a chair while talking with a worker may be revealing his disinterest, while one who leans forward communicates a desire to hear from the worker.

Being conscious of nonverbal signals can pay off for a manager in an awareness of whether they are helping or hindering communication. Some body language that usually helps:

- **Eye contact:** Looking directly at the other person when speaking and listening with a balance of eye contact and eye movement— neither constantly staring nor averting.
- **Body Posture:** Leaning slightly forward with body relaxed and facing the other person.
- **Head and Facial Movements:** Using smiles, nods, raised eyebrows, and other small motions in response to what another is saying.
- **Voice:** Maintaining a pleasant tone and a pace of speech similar to that of the other person.



Likewise, some habitual or unconscious body language distracts from communication. Gestures that interfere include:

- Fiddling with pen or pencil
- Chewing gum or tobacco
- Rubbing beard or mustache
- Smoking
- Tapping fingers or feet
- Locking arms across chest
- Clasping hands behind head
- Invading a speaker's personal space
- Turning body sideways to another person
- Raising volume or pitch of voice beyond listener's comfort level

Applying Skills to Situations

Giving and Receiving Criticism

Many people are uncomfortable dealing with criticism as a listener or a speaker. Giving useful feedback, especially corrective or negative feedback, requires a heightened sensitivity to the receiver's perspective and tune-out threshold. When people feel unfairly criticized, attacked, or threatened, their protective reactions often hinder further communication. In addition to the techniques discussed in the preceding sections, the following guidelines can make these information exchanges more constructive:

- Choose a low-stress time to provide critical feedback.
- Offer criticism in private.
- Allow enough time to discuss reactions, implications, and plans for adjustment.
- If unsure of how an approach will come across, try it out in role-play with another manager or family member.
- Consider in advance what you would like to be different and why.