

Business Body Language: Handshakes, Eye Contact, Posture, and Smiles

Your body language, i.e your demeanor, impacts your success. It's vital that you know how to act when you get to a conference, after-hours, meeting or trade show to make the most effective and efficient use of your time ... and to attract those people whom you want to do business with and add to your network.

The success of any encounter begins the moment someone lays eyes on you. One of the first things they notice about you is your aura, that distinctive atmosphere that surrounds you. You create it, and you are responsible for what it says about you and whom it attracts. Your aura enters with you and starts speaking long before you open your mouth. Since body language conveys more than half of any message in any face-to-face encounter, how you act is vital to your aura.

1) Posture

One of the first key things people notice is how you carry and present yourself. Do you walk and stand with confidence like your mother taught you?

- Stomach in
- Chest out
- Shoulders back
- Head up

Or do you slouch, perhaps with your shoulders drooping, your head forward and your stomach protruding? Are you saying to people that you are not sure of yourself, are not poised and, therefore, not the one they should seek out and get to know? You may be turning people away without even being aware of it.

Command respect by standing tall and claiming the space to which you are entitled. Plant your feet about six to eight inches apart with one slightly in front of the others. My workshop attendees always remark about how this positioning makes them feel "grounded," "rooted" and "balanced" ... great ways to start any encounter!

You also tell people through your posture if you want others to approach you. For instance, if you are talking with one other person and the two of you are forming a rectangle, you will give the message that you have "closed off" your space and don't want to be interrupted. If you doubt me, stand by two people who are in the rectangular position and see how long you go unacknowledged. The two will see you out of their peripheral vision, but won't include you until they have finished their "private" conversation. If, on the other hand, the two of you stand with your feet pointed outward like two sides of an incomplete triangle, you will be inviting others into the conversation. You can make that all-important eye contact.

2) Handshakes

Another vital component you need to bring to any interpersonal encounter is a firm handshake. Again, those few seconds you "shake" can empower or weaken a relationship. Men's handshakes are typically strong and firm because they naturally have a stronger grip.

Women, get a grip and be noticed! I once got a client because the man I shook hands with remarked

about my strong handshake and asked what I did. He decided it was time to hire me to teach his people how to shake hands, too!

Being familiar with the following handshakes will help you immensely in your relationship-building activities:

Controller

A person extends his hand to you, web-to-web, and as soon as your hands are linked, he purposely maneuvers his hand onto the top. He's telling you he wants to be in charge. Keep that in mind as the interaction continues.

Sandwich

Use this one only with people you know. When you envelop another person's hands, you are invading their private space ... where you are to be only when invited. Society promotes the standard handshake but is not as tolerant of using both hands. By the way, this handshake is also known as the politician's handshake ... which may be cause enough for most people to avoid it!

Dead Fish

Imagine rubbing a scaly, dead fish in your hands ... and you got the picture. Your hands typically are wet for two reasons: You are nervous or you have been holding a cold beverage in your right hand and move it to your left just before you shake hands. In either case, it is extremely unpleasant for the receiver. If you experience anxiety, wipe your hands on a napkin, the tablecloth or even lightly on your clothes. What you spend at the dry cleaners will be paid for quickly by the better impression you make. As for the beverage, use common sense.

Limp Fingers

Women, far more than men, extend their fingers rather than their entire hand. It can be painful for the extender, when she is greeted by a man who shakes with his forceful grip. Men tell me this frequently leads to their giving women a lighter handshake. Professional women respond that they want to be treated equally. One of the ways to combat this syndrome is to always extend your full hand (never cup it) horizontally, even if your grip is light.

Ingredients of a Good Handshake

- Hold the person's hand firmly.
- Shake web-to-web, three times maximum.
- Maintain constant eye contact.
- Radiate positive aura.

3) Eye Contact

Make it and keep it! Not only does focused eye contact display confidence on your part, it also helps you understand what the other person is really saying verbally.

When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another, a practiced man relies on the language of the first. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Looking someone in the eye as you meet and talk with him/her also shows you are paying attention. Listening is the most important human relations skill, and good eye contact plays a large part in

conveying our interest in others.

When to look

Begin as soon as you engage someone in a conversation. However, you may wish to start even earlier if you are trying to get someone's attention. Continue it throughout the conversation. Be sure to maintain direct eye contact as you are saying "good-bye." It will help leave a positive, powerful lasting impression.

Where to look

Imagine an inverted triangle in your face with the base of it just above your eyes. The other two sides descend from it and come to a point between your nose and your lips. That's the suggested area to "look at" during business conversations. Socially, the point of the triangle drops to include the chin and neck areas. When people look you "up and down," it's probably more than business or a casual social situation they have in mind!

How long to look

I suggest about 80 - 90 percent of the time. Less than that can be interpreted as discomfort, evasiveness, lack of confidence or boredom. When you stare longer, it can be construed as being too direct, dominant or forceful and make the other person uncomfortable. It's okay to glance down occasionally as long as your gaze returns quickly to the other person. Avoid looking over the other person's shoulders as if you were seeking out someone more interesting to talk with.

4) Smiles

Smiles are an important facial expression. They show interest, excitement, empathy, concern; they create an upbeat, positive environment. Smiles can, however, be overused. Often, men smile when they are pleased; women smile to please. You know which is the most powerful!

To gain and increase respect, first establish your presence in a room, then smile. It is far more professional than to enter a room giggling or "all smiles."

As you review and tweak your body language for your next interpersonal encounter, I suggest you keep in mind another Emerson saying:

What you are stands over you the while and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.

About the Author:

Lillian D. Bjorseth, according to the The Chicago Tribune, is a "networking expert". The Association Forum of Chicagoland calls her "the business networking authority". She's a speaker, trainer and author who helps entrepreneurs through Fortune 100 employees build high-value relationships by honing their business development, business networking and communication skills. For more information, visit www.duoforce.com.