

## COMMUNITY LIVING

The silent language at board meetings

# Posture speaks much louder than words

By Pamela Dittmer McKuen | Special to the Tribune

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If you want to make a point at your next association meeting, don't practice your speech. Practice your posture. Your body language speaks louder than you do, said Lillian Bjorseth, a Lisle-based communications consultant, coach and author.

"About 90 percent of any message is communicated by how we say it, while the words are about 10 percent," she said. "It's the visual, not the vocal."

In the vocabulary of body language, all human stances and gestures convey meaning. Here's how the dynamics apply to a community association board meeting: Board members discuss association affairs and make decisions by voting. A round table promotes interaction because they all can see and hear each other.

"But the problem is, owners are entitled to be there and observe what is going on," said attorney Chuck VanderVennet of [Arlington Heights](#). "If people are sitting in a circle or on four sides of a rectangle, some peoples' backs are to the audience, which can be viewed as disrespectful."

The owners might not be able to hear well, which can lead to misunderstandings, or they might feel excluded, which can lead to accusations of secrecy, he said.

"If someone has to sit with his or her back to the audience, my first choice is the recording person," said Bjorseth. "That person typically does not speak."

A better table configuration is the half-round, with one side open to the audience. Bjorseth said there are two power seats, each carrying a different message. One is the authoritarian seat, which is one of the short sides of a long table. It's usually wide enough for just one person.

The other is the consensus-building seat — in the center of one long side of the table, facing the door. That's the one she advises presidents to take.

"As the president, you should always see who is coming and going because you are in charge," she said.

The seat to the right of the president is the second most powerful, and the one to his left is the third most powerful, she said.

"We've seen larger boards have assigned seats," said Tom Skweres, president of Vanguard Chicago management company in Chicago. Where the property manager sits is a matter of choice and culture, he said.

"If you have a new president, it makes sense that he sits next to the property manager for guidance," he said. "But in some associations, it's the board that is the team and the manager sits to the side."

A few more translations:

- Your report will seem more important if you deliver it while standing rather than sitting.
- Your report will seem even more important if you deliver it while standing behind a lectern.
- If you give a report while walking back and forth in front of the audience, you'll appear friendly and connected.
- Hands above the table to show you are honest and open. Hands under the table convey the idea that you are hiding something.

- If you suspect you'll be challenged by a couple of unhappy board members, ask one of your allies to sit next to or across from them. They'll feel your defense and be less likely to be confrontational.
- Sit back in your chair to show that you are fully present. Lean forward to show a speaker you are interested and lean back to show you are not.

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