

Body-Language Tactics That Sway Interviewers

By: Eugene Raudsepp

Before a job interview, do you peruse magazines or review prepared notes? When the meeting begins, do you wait to be told where to sit or choose your own chair? And do you give passionately expressive or carefully controlled responses?

In each of these instances, your body language speaks volumes about how you'd perform at a company. In fact, some experts say nonverbal cues are more important than verbal ones. According to these studies, body language comprises 55% of the force of any response, whereas the verbal content only provides 7%, and "paralanguage," or the intonation, pauses and sighs given when answering, represents 38% of the emphasis.

Jo-Ann Vega, president of JV Career and Human Resources Consulting Services in Nyack, N.Y., says body language is so important that it frequently torpedoed what we say. "Our nonverbal messages often contradict what we say in words," says Ms. Vega. "When we send mixed messages or our verbal messages don't jibe with our body statements, our credibility can crumble because most smart interviewers believe the nonverbal."

Laid-off managers are a case in point. They're often so traumatized by their terminations that they appear downcast, even when discussing their strengths, says Ms. Vega. Difficult questions can throw them off balance, and their anxiety may cause them to fidget or become overly rigid, she says.

Since nonverbal communication is more eloquent, honest and accurate than verbal communication, such actions reveal your inner confidence. While words can deceive -- many people don't mean what they say or say what they mean -- body language is subconscious. Since it's more spontaneous and less controlled, it shows our true feelings and attitudes.

Still, most people discount the importance of nonverbal communication because their education and training placed more emphasis on spoken words. To become more adept at interpreting and using body language, heighten your awareness of nonverbal signals and learn to trust your "gut" instinct. Then, when interviewing, use the following tips to accentuate body language that stresses professionalism and performance.

The First Moments Realize that you're being judged as soon as you arrive at the company. Set the right tone by being early, then use the extra time to compose yourself. When waiting for interviewers, don't open your briefcase to review notes you've prepared. Instead, glance through available magazines or literature in the waiting area.

This creates the impression that you're relaxed before stressful events, and helps you project confidence during the critical early moments of the interview.

If a receptionist or secretary indicates that the interviewer is ready to see you, enter his or her office as though you belonged. Knocking on the door, or opening it and peeking in, shows hesitation, which may be interpreted as a lack of confidence.

Greet your interviewer with a firm, sincere handshake. More than a few candidates have betrayed their nervousness by extending limp, clammy palms, and shaking hands weakly.

Don't start talking immediately, fumble with your briefcase or dive into a chair. If you aren't invited to sit, choose a chair across from or aside the interviewer's desk. Avoid soft lounge chairs or couches, which can prevent you from rising easily. And don't ask if and where you should sit.

If your interviewer receives a phone call during the meeting, select and review material from your briefcase to give him or her a sense of privacy. Don't show annoyance about the interruption or offer to leave the office. Many interviewers purposely take calls to determine if you'll react adversely to office disruptions.

How Close Can You Get?

Like anyone else, interviewers become uncomfortable if their personal space, or preferred distance from others, is invaded. Extraverted interviewers prefer a "social zone" of between 18 and 48 inches from their bodies, while introverts need more space.

Try to gauge interviewers' preferred distance by their seating arrangements. Move closer only if they seem skeptical about what you're saying. Other attempts to seem "friendly" by moving closer are likely to be threatening. For instance, some interviewers deliberately "interrogate" applicants by sitting or standing closer than they prefer.

When emphasizing key points, project sincerity and confidence by leaning forward, maintaining eye contact and using expressive gestures. Leaning back and looking down may be interpreted as a lack of confidence.

How Do You Speak?

How you say something often is more meaningful than what you say. Use a natural tone and don't deviate from your normal speaking rate, volume, rhythm, pitch, breathiness or resonance. Secure applicants have relaxed, warm and well-modulated voices that match their feelings, allowing them to appropriately express excitement, enthusiasm and interest during conversations.

Conversely, insecure candidates can't control their voice pitch and volume. They have weak, soft, hesitant or tremulous voices, and clear their throats, use "uhs" and "ums" or other nervous mannerisms excessively. Others mask their insecurity by speaking in complex, involved sentences.

Maintain Eye Contact Candidates with secure self-esteem alter their facial expressions to match their message, rather than perpetually wearing the same one. They smile when saying something friendly, and maintain good eye contact, which signifies openness and honesty.

Less-assured candidates don't maintain eye contact, act shy or ashamed or smile at inappropriate times. They may appear downcast or pleading, or drop their eyes and heads, giving them an untrustworthy appearance.

Be cognizant of interviewers' expressions as well. If they don't maintain eye contact, it may mean they're anxious, irritated, disinterested or that they want the conversation to end. An interviewer who looks up may be uncomfortable, trying to remember something or doesn't believe your answer.

Don't overdo eye contact with interviewers, however. A gaze that lasts longer than seven to 10 seconds can cause discomfort or anxiety. Also, don't stare at interviewers during long silences, since it only increases the tension.

Posture and Gestures Even if you're motionless, your posture communicates a message. Managers who put their feet up on desks and their hands behind their heads are saying that they feel confident, dominant or superior, a soldier standing at attention is showing deference to authority and a subordinate who stands rigidly with hands on hips signals defiance or dislike.

Confident applicants have relaxed, balanced postures. They hold their bodies upright, walk freely with their arms swinging and take determined strides. Less-assured candidates, on the other hand, have rigid or stooped postures, drag or shuffle their feet when walking and take short, choppy strides.

Strive for posture that's as free and natural as your speaking style, but don't be too controlled or rehearsed, says Ms. Vega, who advises applicants to "let some of the passion out." When your movements are in sync with your words, you'll seem confident, expressive and controlled.

Reading Interviewers Hiring managers also use gestures to convey specific messages. Nodding signifies approval and encourages applicants to continue talking, while leaning forward shows they're interested. Folded arms, crossed legs, picking imaginary lint from clothing or running their fingers along their noses are signs that an interviewer disagrees with you. Thumb twiddling, finger drumming and other fidgeting mannerisms mean the interviewer isn't paying attention.

Guard against using similar gestures or betraying your nervousness by clenching or wringing your hands. Other actions that convey stress include holding your legs or arms tensely, perching on the edge of a chair or playing with a watch or ring.

One caveat: Don't imagine a hidden meaning in every gesture. For example, if an interviewer rubs her nose while you're speaking, she may just have an itchy nose. Try to gauge the situation when seeking the meaning to a mannerism. Most experts look for clues in groups of gestures, not random ones.

Nevertheless, communicating the right nonverbal signals can help you convey an enthusiastic, positive and confident attitude during job interviews. And learning to read interviewers' cues can improve your prospects as well.

From the archives of the National Business Employment Weekly. The late Mr. Raudsepp, who was president of Princeton Creative Research Inc., a Princeton, N.J., consulting firm, was a frequent NBEW contributor between 1984 and 1995. This article was selected for its continuing relevance.