

MODULE 7 - BODY LANGUAGE

You probably already know that verbal language comprises only part of the way in which we communicate with others. By far the greater part is by body language and the use of the voice. This applies when you are speaking in front of an audience as much as when you are communicating one-to-one, and thus it would be foolish to ignore body language when learning how to give successful presentations. Equally, you need to know how to use your voice correctly and how to avoid the more common mistakes. Think of body language and your voice as two more tools you need to learn how to use in order to enhance your public speaking. The good news is that the tricks and traps you need to know about are easy to learn and easy to apply. When you use them successfully, you will appear far more confident and authoritative in what you say. Your presentations will *look* good, and as we all know, looking good is half the battle!

What you may not know is that using *inappropriate* body language or voice techniques can actually alienate the people you are addressing. It is important to emphasise this point: poor body language does not just have a neutral effect, ie, you are merely not doing as well as you could: it is actually damaging your image as an individual and as a presenter.

This is why we have devoted this Module to these two topics, body language and voice. There is not much to learn but that information is of crucial importance.

BODY LANGUAGE

Instinct or imitation?

People often ask whether body language is learned or instinctive. The answer is that it is both. Studies have shown that blind children still use what we regard as natural body and facial language, even though they have never seen this.

There is definitely a learned element, with some cultural differences. Thus, there is a commonality of certain gestures such as the smile, the frown and the shrug, but other elements are learned through observation and imitation.

The practical lesson for you in this is that *everyone* uses body language. It is inbuilt into us. By learning to interpret that language you are not doing anything artificial or manipulative. It is as natural as learning a verbal language.

Good foundations

There is a whole language of gestures and movements which you should and should not make. If you are presenting material in front of an audience, however, the first thing you need to get right is your posture. This is the foundation upon which all else is built.

Often, when the words “good posture” is mentioned, people think of a ramrod stiff spine, shoulders back, and a book balanced on the top of the head. The ultimate image is that of

an Irish dancer, with a spine as straight as an arrow, chin held high and eyes focused somewhere near the ceiling. The other image usually brought to mind is that of a soldier, again with a straight spine and a rigid posture. Those of us who have never learned Irish dancing or undergone a military training, who slouch through life with a spine slightly bent from hours spent poring over books, immediately think that this is unattainable. Oh, we try. We arch our backs and sit up straight – and this lasts for at least five seconds, because that posture is unfamiliar to us and is thus often uncomfortable. We can't maintain it for any length of time and we know that attempting to maintain an upright posture during a presentation is (a) one more burden to bear in a difficult situation and (b) something we'd immediately forget about anyway in the effort of making the presentation. Thus, good intentions wilt away under the practicalities of the situation.

You'll be pleased to know that a ramrod-straight spine is exactly what the average therapist should work to avoid, not to achieve. (We say the "average therapist" because a number of therapists are ex-military and will naturally have this posture. We have some words of advice for them below on how to soften their body language).

What you are aiming for is a posture, a way of standing, which is neither a slouch nor a military stance. The ideal is half way between the two. Don't forget that your aim with your body language is to communicate, and by adopting a relaxed posture you are communicating that you are just like the rest of the population. In other words, you are "one of the people", someone who is perceived as being equal and approachable, not someone who is operating on a different plane. (You might want to re-read our comments about the use of technical language, obscure quotations etc in Module 1 as this touches on the same point). Think of your posture as a marketing tool which you are going to use to create your image. That image is that you are a therapist – open, caring, normal, not separated from your clients by a desk and a string of degrees. Someone, in fact, they would find easy to talk to. You are like them. People whose posture is too straight and rigid are *not* like them: they have clearly undergone specialist training or a specialist discipline to achieve this. If you think this is overselling the message, read through the next few paragraphs and then see what you think.

The correct posture

The correct posture for you as a therapist and as a speaker is a relaxed stance but one which gives you balance and security. We'll explain that in more detail.

Stand facing the audience with your feet firmly on the floor. Your feet should be a shoulder-width apart, with your centre of gravity in the middle. Your knees should be slightly bent, rather than locked straight. This sends the message of firmness, security and balance.

There is also a practical reason for adopting this stance.

If your centre of gravity is in the middle of your body and your knees are relaxed, you will not over-balance when you make gestures with your hands or look down to turn over

a page of your notes. If you lock your knees, however, when you turn your shoulders you might well find yourself swivelling on one foot and thus there is the potential to over-balance. Try it and see which feels more secure and comfortable.

Your shoulders should be relaxed (see exercises below). Most people who are tense will unknowingly raise their shoulders, sometimes almost to their ears. Your audience will pick this up subconsciously. They will know you are tense. That is acceptable in the first few minutes of a talk but sends completely the wrong message after that. You need to be sending the message that you are comfortable talking about your speciality. If you are unhappy and uncertain, why should the audience react any differently? They will pick up on the signals you are giving out and will react accordingly.

Raise your rib cage. Most of us – especially those of us who work in front of computers or who do a great deal of studying – will find that the rib cage rests virtually on the stomach, especially when sitting down. Raising your rib cage has the effect of straightening your spine, but not to an unnatural degree. Try it and see how it feels. You'll also find that you automatically pull in your stomach. As an added benefit, you'll find that it is far easier and more natural to keep your rib cage raised than to try to focus on straightening your spine. By using this method, you don't need to even think about your spine – it will happen naturally.

Finally, raise your chin. Once again, don't do this to an unnatural degree, just tilt it upwards slightly.

If you try this posture out at home you'll find that you feel taller and more in control. That is exactly how you will look and that is the message you will send the people to whom you are speaking – "I am here, I'm relaxed and I'm confident." Thus, you start off your talk on the right foot.

Exercises

The key to adopting this stance easily and naturally is to ensure that your shoulders are relaxed. As we said above, the immediate response to stress is to unconsciously raise the shoulders. This means that the muscles in your shoulders, neck and face are tight and tense. You need to take positive steps to reverse this situation. This will have two effects. The first is to ensure that you drop your shoulders from this tense position to one which appears more relaxed. The second is that you will actually reduce your stress levels. You know that there is a link between mind and body. In this case, you are leading with your body. Reduce the tension there and you will reduce the stress level in your mind. The physiological changes will be followed by emotional changes. Once again, try it at home and see how different you feel in the two positions – shoulders high, and shoulders relaxed.

The following exercises will help you. Each takes only a minute to carry out and they can be done just before you step in front of your audience.

Exercise 1

Deliberately raise your right shoulder up towards your right ear until it is nearly touching it. SLOWLY lower it as far as you can. Repeat with the left shoulder. Repeat ten further times on each side.

Exercise 2

Look to the front. Tilt your head sideways towards your right shoulder until your ear is nearly touching your shoulder. Still maintaining this position, SLOWLY roll your head towards the centre and then towards your left shoulder. Pause. SLOWLY roll your head back to the centre and then to your right shoulder. Repeat ten more times. Don't attempt to roll your head backwards past your shoulders – this can cause damage to your neck.

Exercise 3

With your arms hanging loosely by your side, roll your right shoulder as far back as you can. Make sure you can feel your shoulder blades move. SLOWLY repeat this with your left shoulder. Repeat this exercise ten more times.

Doing these three exercises will remove the tension from your neck and shoulder areas and improve your stress levels.

We emphasise that these exercises need to be carried out slowly: the aim is to reduce tension, not increase it!

We've now given you instructions as to the correct way to stand. Let's now look at the kind of messages you send out by adopting the right and the wrong postures.

Posture - right messages and wrong messages

We all agree that body language sends messages. You can choose which message you send. Let's look at the wrong messages.

The wrong message

A rigid posture can send an authoritarian message. This is because (a) to achieve this, as we said above, takes a degree of training and discipline over an extended period which most of us have never experienced, and (b) most people associate such a stance as being "military" in origin. It shouts of control, of a lack of spontaneity, a lack of individual expression. Individual expression has been suppressed by training and discipline. As a therapist, this is absolutely the last message you wish to send. You need to convey the fact that you are warm, caring and open.

What do you do, therefore, if you have indeed undergone training which has given you this type of posture?

There are two things you can do. One is to soften your body language (see below). The other is to make a positive out of a negative. Tell the audience, fairly early on in your talk, about your background and give it a positive spin. You were in the military so you know all about stress, illness and injury. You learned how to talk and to listen to the men and women under your command (or your comrades as appropriate). You thoroughly approve of the new climate in the military which allows servicemen and women to admit to fears. By doing this, you have explained, without specifically referring to your posture, why it is different and you have also told them that you are a caring person, not a rigid, authoritarian one.

You might also have particularly good posture if you have a background in dance or acting. In this case, there is usually no problem, because you will use expressive gestures and appear open. Your back may be straight but your overall posture is not rigid: you are not sending an authoritarian message.

Right message

A relaxed posture sends the message that you are at ease with yourself and the material you are about to present. That doesn't mean that you aren't nervous, simply that you have a reasonable degree of confidence. Don't forget – if you don't have this confidence, fake it by adopting this attitude. You can, at the least, *look* as if you are confident, and by adopting the correct posture, you will in fact *feel* more confident.

Gestures

In this section, we are going to look at gestures which, for you as a speaker, are negative gestures, ones which are positive, and gestures you should look for in an audience. We will also look at ways of counteracting or neutralising negative gestures.

We would first like to make three points.

1. Gestures should be interpreted according to the context in which they occur. Repeated touching of the nose, as you will learn, is a sign of deceit. If, however, the hall in which you are speaking is dusty, you may find yourself doing so simply because your nose is itching! When you see other people make a particular gesture, therefore, note it as part of a sequence of gestures which will tell you what their attitude is, but always remember that any one particular gesture could have an entirely different meaning according to the context. Remember, therefore, that one man's itchy nose is another man's deceit;
2. Gestures can be made one at a time, or can be made in groups, usually known as "clusters". An example of a cluster might be where someone scratches their nose with one hand, while their other hand, thumb up, is tucked inside the side pocket of their trousers. You need to read the whole picture. Sometimes, both signals will send the same message (in this case, "Don't trust me – I feel superior to you and what's

more, I'm deceiving you," but in other cases the signals may be contradictory. You then need to look carefully at other gestures to see what the true picture is

3. Body language becomes both interesting and extremely valuable when the gestures, either single gestures or clusters, are at odds with the spoken word. A typical example of this is where the speaker says, "I am absolutely confident that this treatment works." Unfortunately for him, he says this whilst scratching his neck (a gesture indicating doubt). People listening to him will not know why they are not wholly convinced by what he is saying but the reason lies in his body language.

Let's look now at gestures you should avoid or should use with care when speaking in public. These fall into five main categories, gestures which indicate:

1. Insecurity
2. Aggression
3. Uncertainty
4. Superiority
5. Deceit.

Gestures to avoid

Insecurity

Many insecurity gestures involve the crossing of the arms in front of the body to form a barrier against a perceived threat – in the speaker's case, the audience. We can call them "closed" gestures.

1. A classic gesture of insecurity is where a speaker stands with their hands hanging down but crossed at or near the wrists in front of their body at about waist height. This is a form of holding hands as a means of achieving security. When we are children, we hold hands with adults, often parents or family. When we ourselves are adults and are feeling insecure, we reach for the nearest hand – our own. Many people adopt this posture believing it is a neutral posture. It is not.
2. A more obvious gesture of insecurity is where one arm is held across the body with that hand gripping the other arm, which is often hanging down to one side.
3. A gesture often exhibited by Prince Charles is where he stands with one arm across his body fiddling with the cuffs of his other sleeve. This indicates nervousness and is a disguised arms-across-body gesture.
4. A variation of this, the disguised arms-across-body is where a speaker hugs something against the front of the body at chest or waist height. This "something" is that person's barrier against a perceived threat. Don't use your script in this way!

Uncertainty

1. Scratching the neck or ear is a gesture of doubt or uncertainty. This gesture can contradict verbal statements of certainty and give the impression of hypocrisy.

Aggression

1. A gesture which can appear aggressive is where the speaker has his hands on hips with his fingers facing forward and his jacket pushed back. This indicates control which might verge on aggression. In the animal kingdom, this is an attempt to look bigger, rather in the same way that a threatened bird will fluff itself up. The attempt to look bigger comes from the elbows, which are jutting outwards. The person adopting this stance is making his body frame appear bigger and is staking a claim to a larger amount of space. It is a display of fearlessness as the speaker's chest is voluntarily exposed.
2. If the arms are crossed and the fists tightly clenched, this indicates not just aggression but active hostility. A speaker might unwittingly adopt this pose if confronted by a persistent or aggressive questioner.

Superiority

1. The classic gesture which signals a feeling of self-confidence amounting to superiority is that of hands behind the back with one palm gripping the back of the other hand. This gesture can often be seen used by members of the Royal Family. (This is not intended as a political comment, simply an observation – watch them on television and see for yourself. Also, don't forget that this gesture can mean a high degree of *confidence*, which is good, and not necessarily *superiority*, which is not). The basis of this confidence/superiority gesture is an act of fearlessness, as the person making the gesture is exposing his throat and chest. They feel secure enough to do this.

You can adopt this posture for a few seconds before you speak in order to give yourself confidence, but do it where no-one can see you, ideally with your back to a wall.

There is a whole sub-set of gestures using the thumb, which signals superiority. These are found as part of a gesture cluster (try making a gesture with your thumb without using your hand!). This group of gestures denote ego, dominant superiority or even aggression. These thumb gestures are often made by people who consider themselves high-status. Such people may demonstrate that fact in other ways as well, for example, by wearing expensive clothes or jewellery.

2. One of the most commonly seen “thumb” gestures is where the person has his hands in his pockets but leaves the thumbs protruding. Here, an attempt has been made to hide the attitude of superiority (hands in the pockets), but the thumbs tell the true story. There is an unconscious element of secrecy here.

3. Another commonly seen “thumbs” gesture is where the arms are folded across the chest. The hands may be tucked away under the folded arms but the thumbs are free and pointed upwards. This is a gesture of superiority verging on aggression.
4. Pointing with the thumb shows disrespect, another version of superiority. If a speaker needs to refer to another speaker or someone handling the audio-visual equipment, he should not gesture with his thumb.
5. Thumb gestures are often accompanied by rocking on the balls of the feet (a subconscious attempt to gain extra height), which is a classic gesture amongst the animal kingdom to appear taller or bigger in an attempt to establish superiority. This gesture is an *active* attempt to announce superiority rather than a calm assumption that it exists (see “hands behind the back”).
6. Thumb gestures can cause confusion amongst an audience when they are used in conjunction with passive verbal language by a speaker – “I totally accept the point you’ve just made”. This results in an appearance of insincerity.

The message for a speaker, therefore, is – keep your thumbs tucked out of sight.

Deceit

These gestures have to be avoided at all costs. Learn them, and if you catch yourself using one of these gestures, adopt another posture.

The basic principal behind these gestures is that the hands are used instinctively to hide the lie or to avoid seeing the person who is being lied to.

1. A hand or hands over the mouth indicates a verbal lie. The most common manifestation of this gesture is where one of the speaker’s hands is raised to half-cover the mouth. This gesture is often disguised as an attempt to smother a cough.
2. A hand or hands over the eyes indicates unwillingness to look at the people to whom the lie is being told. This might be disguised as an attempt to brush a fringe away by raising the hand to the face, then over the nose to the hair, effectively covering the eyes.
3. Rubbing the eye, or just below the eye (more commonly seen in women) also indicates the same unwillingness to look the recipient of a lie in the eye.
4. Rubbing the nose repeatedly.
5. Pulling at the collar (male or female) also indicates a lie.

The message for you, therefore, is – keep your hands away from your face, ears and neck at all costs!

You might be wondering by this stage what on earth you *can* do with your hands and arms.

Gestures you should employ

1. In general - your basic posture should be as described above, with your arms hanging loosely by your sides if possible. If this makes you feel too exposed, you can rest your hands on the speaker's podium, if there is one, or on a table. Avoid arms-crossed gestures.
2. Make sure that all your gestures are “open” gestures: You read above about arms-crossed gestures, where the arms were subconsciously used to form a barrier against the audience. Open gestures are the opposite of this: they are gestures where the arms are held out in front, to the side or behind the back. In the animal kingdom, this means that the one making the gesture is exhibiting a lack of fear – confidence – by exposing their vulnerable chest and throat areas to possible attack by another. They are saying, I can cope”.

One example of this is where you make a point to the audience, for example – “I really believe this”. Don't just stand there with your hands glued firmly to your sides: extend your arms outwards and to the side. Thus, your words are words of confidence, and your gesture is also one of confidence.

One way to soften any of the closed gestures above is to make sure that one arm is making an open gesture. You might, for example, desperately feel you need to do *something* with your hands because you are shaking so much. Stand with one hand in a pocket (with the thumb well hidden!), but use the other hand to make an open gesture towards your audience. This is a gesture cluster. There are no gestures which indicate aggression or superiority but there is a gesture which says you are open. The overall effect will be neutral.

Plan how you intend to stand in advance and then adopt this posture. This avoids you shuffling your arms and hands around whilst on the stage. You can also plan your stance with the intended messages in mind.

3. Make expansive gestures. Don't make tight little gestures close to your body. If you're going to make a gesture, really go for it!
4. Use the palms of your hands. Palms upwards indicates submission. This gesture can be used to calm a questioner –“I think you have a very good point there.” Palms downward means domination – “Hush, the people at the back can't hear”, you might need to tell your audience as you stretch out your arms, palms down, to tell them who is in charge of events in the hall at that moment (whatever your private feelings might be!).

Softening your body language

We talked above about softening your body language if you naturally have a rigid posture. You can now see that the way to do this is to concentrate on using open body language. The gestures you use are a very powerful tool – use them to send a message to your audience telling them about yourself and what you are feeling. If you are genuinely a caring and open person, allow your own body language to say so.

Using your space

One thing we haven't addressed up to this point is how and when you should move around the speaking area assigned to you. This may be a stage or may simply be an area which is cleared of chairs.

1. Don't stand still in the same place throughout your entire talk. Introduce some variation to break up the monotony of watching you in the same place: move around, even if it is only a few paces in different directions.
2. When you move around, your body language is saying, "I am laying claim to this territory". By standing in one position, you are adopting a rather passive territorial attitude. Taking two steps to the right or to the left as you speak, especially if you focus on the part of the audience which will now be immediately in front of you, says you are relaxed and in control of your space.

Audience reaction

Let's now turn all this around and look at how you can interpret the body language of the audience. Signs to watch out for are:

1. Stroking the chin: this is an evaluation gesture which denotes interest or fascination. The person making the gesture is listening intently to what you have to say and will reach an emotional or intellectual decision on it. One useful trick is to direct questions such as, "What do you think of that point?" at such people. It gives them the chance to express any doubts or queries, which you can then address.
2. Elbow on the arm of the chair, hand under the chin and thumb raised: this is a negative cluster which shows that the person making the gesture is having negative thoughts about what you are saying. Watch people in this position carefully – they may well ask critical questions.
3. Arm across the body plus chin stroking: this indicates boredom. If a substantial proportion of your audience is using this cluster, you need to do something. You might say something like, "Let's liven things up by talking about".

The value of reading these gestures is that you know in advance that you have a problem. If it is only one person, or a few people, you can consider this normal and natural – not

everyone is going to like you or what you have to say. If it is more, you can act before the problem manifests itself by your audience becoming openly critical or starting to yawn. Above all, don't worry: this happens to every speaker at one time or another. Sometimes, for some reason which is impossible to explain, the talk you have given successfully ten times before just doesn't appeal to a particular audience. By watching their body language, however, you can control the situation by switching topics, speed of delivery or even your own body language.

VOICE

Some people are born having a good speaking voice: most of us have to work at it. It may surprise you to know that some of the world's most noted public speakers were bad, if not appalling, when they started their careers. Winston Churchill had a bad stutter. John F Kennedy was wooden in his delivery and spoke too fast. Both saw their faults and took steps to learn better ways to do things – and you could say that they succeeded! What they can do, you can. Don't forget, we're just talking about the way they spoke, not their abilities as politicians. You may not be able to match that, but learning how to use your voice more effectively? That's easy.

There are some very simple rules to remember.

1. Don't tire your voice out. No matter how badly you speak at present, it is better to say something than nothing, but if you strain your voice to the point where your throat is hoarse and you are inaudible, you might as well not be on the stage. This can happen if you try to do something which is false and unnatural with your voice. It will strain your vocal cords and by the end of your talk, you won't be able to say a word. Thus, whatever techniques and tricks you try, the bottom line is that if they strain your voice, they're wrong for you.
2. Alter the pitch of your voice. Many people are not sure exactly what is meant by pitch. What this means is that you mustn't speak in a monotone. You are there to inform and, to a degree, to entertain your audience, not to hypnotise them into somnolence. You need to make sure that your voice goes up and down. You should take this further and make sure that it goes up and down at the correct points. Use a higher pitched voice to convey emotion – fear, excitement, commitment, belief; and a lower pitch to convey sympathy or any of the more caring emotions.
3. If you have an accent, don't try to disguise it. Here, we are talking about “class” or “regional” accents. In the UK and in some other parts of the world, there is a belief that some accents are low class, low status. Some people try to make their accents sound like ... well, more like Prince Charles. Unless you are a natural mimic, went to drama school and think you can keep this up through the thirty minutes plus of your talk, don't even consider it because it won't work. Remember – you are a therapist. People want and are expecting you to be natural, to be one of the people. Your accent won't count against you: an attempt, almost inevitably unsuccessful, to lie to your

audience will be noticed within minutes and you will lose all credibility (and those clients who should have been rushing up for your card afterwards).

4. Closely allied with this point about accents is the need to make sure that the audience can understand every word you say. Some accents cause you to “swallow” vowels or consonants. Make sure that all your vowels and consonants can be clearly heard. The only way to do this is to tape record yourself and hear what you sound like to other people. Don’t forget that when you hear yourself speak without the benefit of a tape recorder you are hearing the vibrations your voice is making in your skull, so this is not a true representation.

Take a reasonably long – about 10 minutes worth – piece of text and read it into a tape recorder. It needs to be this long in order to allow you to relax, and to speak the way you would speak in front of an audience, once you had settled into your talk. Analyse yourself. Which particular vowels and consonants are unclear? Re-read the text, concentrating on those vowels and consonants. Emphasise them to the point of exaggeration if you have to. When you listen to the tape, you will notice how much clearer the text is. After that, it is down to regular practice on your part – read some text each day, concentrating on your weak areas. It will soon become automatic.

5. Vary the intensity, volume and speed of your voice in order to keep the attention of your audience. In particular, make sure that you are never speaking too fast – there are only so many words the human brain can process. It may speed you towards the end of your talk but that talk will be better received if you take it slowly and clearly. One tip is to speak at a speed which you think is slightly too slow – that will be the correct speed.

There is a great deal of information in this Module for you to digest and practice. Make it into fun. Try out different body language in front of friends and colleagues and see how they react. When you choose texts to read into your tape recorder, you don’t have to choose serious material – it can be pages from your favourite novel or whatever takes your fancy. The thing to remember is that *you must keep practicing*. It will very soon become second nature. Your public image will improve dramatically.