

Recruiting and Hiring Advice

Interview Body Language: The Candidate's Non-Verbal Communication



By: Sharon Saylor

As a body communications specialist, employers often ask me, "What nonverbal signals should I watch when [conducting an interview](#) that will help me know I have the right person?" It's a good question, particularly in an economy where so many applicants apply for every position.

Often the nonverbal signs (or simply "nonverbals") you may already know to watch for – a firm handshake, a smile, good posture, eye contact – are choreographed by job candidates to make the right first impression. Additionally, there is the phenomenon of mirroring and matching.

Studies have shown that mirroring and matching occurs as rapport builds between two subjects. As you're [interviewing candidates](#), you may both begin to unconsciously coordinate movements, even movements as subtle as eye blinks and head nods, which can create a false sense of trust or likeability.

In other words, a candidate's nonverbals during an interview do not give a full picture of how they will behave in real-life circumstances. Reading nonverbals without knowing the person's everyday (baseline) behaviors can tell you how the other person is feeling in the moment, but not their [performance](#) when they are on the job.

Assessing the Job Candidate's Interview Skills

In addition to those nonverbals that job candidates know to choreograph to make a great first impression, remember: while some candidates may excel on the job skills, due to nervousness or anxiety, their [interview skills](#) may be lacking.

For example, rapid breathing from a case of the nerves can cause a series of less-than-flattering nonverbals including twitches and fidgets, stumbling for words, sweaty palms, stiff or jerky gestures, rapid eye movement and a high-pitched voice.

If you judge these candidates too quickly, you may label those nonverbal signals as deception. In reality, if the candidate were able to calm their nerves and regain a normal breathing pattern, those behaviors would disappear. Remember, accomplished liars can boldly make eye contact, smile and tell you what you want to hear with hardly a wince.

So if the accepted wisdom behind reading body language doesn't work, what does?

Conduct a Walkabout Litmus Test

To know if you have the right person for the position, you must drill deeper than the traditional interview process will allow you to go. Sure, a well-written resume shows the necessary skill sets. And great job references and a solid interview give a best-case "look" at the person. But what is missing is a view of the behaviors, traits and temperament that the candidate displays in the real world.

To get a glimpse of these traits and temperament, you must add a final step to the interview process.

After performing the perfunctory handshake, and "Thank you, we'll get back with you," stand up and use a palm up gesture as you motion toward the door.

Begin to walk the person from the interview room, then say, "By the way, could I..." and take the person for a walk through the office.

Begin to walk the person from the interview room, then say, "By the way, could I..." and take the person for a walk through the office.

This office "walkabout" is where you can see and hear the candidate un-choreographed. During this walk, introduce the candidate to three different levels of employees within the organization and observe their interaction with each:

- How does the candidate react to each situation? Do they show interest and ask questions? How quickly do they smile? Do they make eye contact and for how long? Do they appear comfortable in engaging in other rapport-building skills?
- Do they project the traits and temperament required for the position? For example, a service position behavior pattern might include a quicker, larger smile and a voice pattern similar to a flight attendant; whereas the more senior position would be engaging, yet slower to smile and use a voice pattern similar to the flight captain.
- How do others interact with the candidate? Observe their interactions and ask yourself from the position of interested bystander, "Who is likely to dominate?" The answer to this question should tell you if the temperament will match the job's requirements. The nonverbals to watch for as you determine who is likely to dominate is how are both parties breathing. For example, as in the case of a person that doesn't interview well, breathing that is rapid or high in the chest is a sign of discomfort.

The walkabout allows you to see how the candidate's behaviors affect others. Since it is difficult for the candidate to choreograph the walkabout, it is often the most informative part of your interview process.

Quickly taking a snapshot of someone's behaviors and making a blanket judgment is a very tricky thing. But when the right hire will make a world of difference to your business, it's worth the effort to carefully observe their behavior from the time they enter to the time they depart.

Author Bio

Sharon Saylor, MBA, is author of *What Your Body Says* (and how to master the message): [*Inspire, Influence, Build Trust, and Create Lasting Business Relationships*](#) (Wiley, 2010). She teaches people how to speak and present to be remembered. As a certified group dynamics and behavioral coach, Sharon trains, counsels and coaches professionals to become stronger, more influential communicators and leaders. Visit Sharon online at [WhatYourBodySays](#).