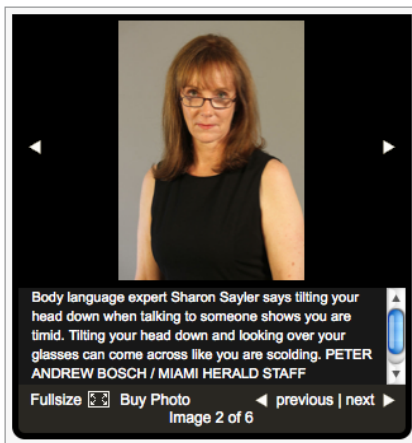


Messages you send through body language can affect your career

By Cindy Krischer Goodman
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The wrong body language could derail your progress in networking and climbing the career ladder, experts say.



Body language expert Sharon Sayler says tilting your head down when talking to someone shows you are timid. Tilting your head down and looking over your glasses can come across like you are scolding.

Sitting around the table for the first time with a new client, Jane Snell found herself getting more and more frustrated. Although she owns her Coconut Creek construction company, JS-1 Construction, the half-dozen men seated around the table were addressing their questions and comments to her male assistant. It wasn't until days later that she discovered where she

had gone wrong: her smile.

“The way I was grinning said administrative assistant, not owner,” Snell says.

Our posture, our facial expressions, even the placement of our legs can speak volumes about what we're conveying in the workplace. We can put in hours networking or working late and then blow our image as confident experts by sending a different message with something as simple as a smile.

Sharon Sayler, body language expert and owner of Competitive Edge Communications, has been educating women and men about the hidden non-verbal statements in business that can ruin a deal, diminish credibility, even create doubt about capability. In workplaces with increasing diversity, age differences and cultural peculiarities, what you are saying with your eyes, feet and hands could be as game-changing as what comes out of your mouth.

“There are a lot of nuances to what's being sent unintentionally,” Sayler says. “We need to understand messages we're sending and be strategic. When you're not getting the response you want, you need to think about why.”

For example, women are too quick to smile, she says. “Executives rarely smile, so if a male executive sees you smiling like a joker, he will think you must be the assistant. Instead, she advises being strategic.” “When someone introduces himself and says his name, that’s when you smile and say, Happy to meet you.”

Inez Romaguera, a South Florida employee benefits broker, recently learned she, too, was sending the wrong message with her body language. Romaguera, owner of Strategic Benefits, wears heels as part of her work attire. Locked in a conversation with a shorter male, she typically would shift her feet to appear less intimidating. “It was taking away my power and making me seem less confident.”

Romaguera says she now stands with her feet apart and firmly planted as she networks and make presentations. There are subtle things we don’t notice we’re doing that apply to business owners because we do so much networking.

Sayler says the worst gaffes usually involve our chin and feet. In workplace situations where there are height differences, keep your chin parallel to the ground, she advises. It may require taking a step back. Tilting your chin up or down could cause you to come across as snooty or timid, she says: Either way, it does not say leadership. Also, a head tilt, even to make eye contact, creates a shrill voice pattern, which could make someone come across as a whiner and diminishes authority.

Anything other than a stance with both feet firmly on the floor could send the message you’re off balance, personally or professionally, she says. And, if you want someone to know you’re interested and listening, make sure feet are pointed toward them. If you’re the speaker and someone’s feet are pointed toward the door, it’s a message they’re ready to make an exit, she says.

Sayler says one client was exacerbating the rough patch he hit in business. Slouched shoulders, shuffling feet, tucked-down chin, gave the appearance to others of being beaten down: It was affecting how his clients saw him and it was affecting how he saw himself.

David Dorr of Dorr Asset Management of Miami says personal coaching brought his unintended messages to the fore. He hadn’t realized he was racing through financial presentations to clients without taking breaths, sending the message he wasn’t speaking with authority. “I was telling them about how they should invest but I was losing their attention because I wasn’t giving them time to digest.”

Dorr began to watch the body language of others he felt had a powerful presence. Nine out of 10 times they were breathing between sentences. It’s something small, but it might have changed a deal or cost me an opportunity.

Now, more attuned to body language, Dorr finds himself watching the small cues others give him when he speaks. I watch the way they shift their feet or eyes and I think, Maybe I shouldn’t waste more time here.

Body language expert Carol Kinsey Goman says even leaders have to be careful with what they might inadvertently be saying through posture. Goman, author of *The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help or Hurt How You Lead*, says a leader's natural sitting position expanding with hands behind head, elbows wide and legs loosely crossed could undermine his efforts in leading collaborative teams. If you're sending the message that you're the boss who has all the answers, why would anyone else need or dare to contribute?

Goman says most people don't realize, one small nonverbal signal can change the dynamics of an entire business interaction.

Snell, of JS-1 Construction, says she, for one, now realizes it.

Workplace columnist Cindy Krischer Goodman is CEO of BalanceGal LLC, a provider of news and advice on how to balance work and life.

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