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THE SUBTLE SABOTEUR TO RELATIONSHIPS: DISMISSIVE BODY LANGUAGE

By Sharon Saylor, MBA, ACC, CEC and founder of Competitive Edge Communications

First Lady Michelle Obama was caught on video yesterday during the President's 2013 inaugural luncheon. appearing to roll her eyes in displeasure at the Speaker of the House.

During the Inauguration Day luncheon, President Barack Obama leaned behind Mrs. Obama to talk with Speaker of the House John Boehner. When Boehner replied, he tapped Michelle Obama. We may never know if it was the comment, the tap or both, but she was not amused and it showed in her dismissive body language response.

Dismissive body language works, if your intention is to show disapproval without saying a word, Be aware though, it is also a subtle saboteur. It happens most often as an unconscious response to our own hurt feelings, misunderstanding of what just happened or those righteous indignation moments where "I know I'm right and you're wrong!"

Dismissive body language / behaviors are often used to:

- minimize or ignore the other person's feelings
- defend your own bad behavior
- distort or generalize what just happened
- diminish the other person in the eyes of others
- challenge the other person's right to feel or be a specific way.

Dismissive behavior can be a smirk that suggests irritation or a furrowed brow to show confusion or dislike, or an arched eyebrow and eyeroll convey disapproval, annoyance or anger. It can be a hand gesture to brush you away, or someone turning their back to you.

Whatever the dismissive behavior it leaves a wake of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or worse, conflict. It will instantly stop rapport. If dismissive body language is used often it destroys trust and safety permanently harming a relationship.

Dismissive behaviors are an incredibly frustrating moment if you are on the receiving end. Most people aren't even aware when they nonverbally dismiss someone. They often argue about whether or not they actually did dismiss you.

How To "Fix" Dismissive Body Language

If you are the one feeling dismissed, come from a place of giving someone the benefit of the doubt. Gently ask them about what just happened. Don't wait too long or they may not remember what happened and why they did the behavior.

Begin your reply by adding a language softener or preface. For example, "You may already know this, but...", "I'm curious...", or "I'm sure you didn't mean this..." Language softeners make a huge difference when asking about dismissive gestures. The "dismitter" may not even be aware he or she was doing it!

If you recognize yourself as the "dismitter," the first step to resolve your use of dismissive nonverbals is to adopt a mindset that is constantly checking in with your internal dialogue and feelings by answering these questions:

- Are they purposefully trying to annoy me?
- Are they aware of what they are saying or doing and the meaning I place on it?
- Are they being passive-aggressive towards me for some reason?

When we slow down our immediate response, we can minimize dismissive body language and the hurt feelings it can cause. But know that it is a reflection of what you are really thinking.

Spend some time to reflect on why you are dismissing another person. If someone said you did, take it seriously. Stop and really listen to the other person; maybe they are only trying to tell you something and are not as skilled as you would like at conveying the message.

Reality Check: Now, I'm not talking pathological behavior here... For example, there are people who use passive-aggressive dismissive behavior as a weapon of compliance and there are those narcissists that haven't a clue. The tips shared here are for those common, everyday moments of dismissiveness that happen, often unconsciously.

About the Author: Sharon Sayler, MBA, ACC, CEC and founder of Competitive Edge Communications — a company devoted to teaching professionals how to become influential leaders using critical verbal and nonverbal skills. She is a published author of three books. Her latest is *What Your Body Says and How to Master the Message* (John Wiley & Sons), it has been published in six languages and is suggested reading at universities around the world. Visit www.SharonSayler.com for more information.