

## MESSAGE SWITCHING

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"What you are screams so loudly I cannot hear what you say."

American poet Henry W. Longfellow wrote those words more than a hundred years ago, long before body language became a popular subject. Longfellow's message is clear: your body sometimes contradicts your words. When you send mixed messages to the people you manage or the members of your club, you confuse and frustrate them. In many cases, you contribute directly to substandard performance and misinterpretation of your meanings. You needn't cause these problems. On the contrary, you can ensure you don't cause them by periodically taking a "body check"—a look at your nonverbal signals.

### Starting at the Top

During normal conversational contact with others, the first thing you look at is the other person's face. You have been trained to look there for signs of recognition and approval. The face conveys messages far out of proportion to its size. In fact, the face sends the most potent and easily recognized messages. Can you remember having been shattered by some devastating look on the face of your mother, a favorite teacher or friend?

When I suggest starting your body check at your head, I want you to make certain your face isn't contradicting your words. For example, in our culture, eye contact is very important during conversation as a method of conveying sincerity. If you want the person with whom you are talking to believe you, you must maintain eye contact. And if you are the listener in the conversation, eye contact demonstrates your interest, proves your attention and substantiates your comprehension.

If you speak to or listen to another while examining the tips of your shoes, then you're miscommunicating—sending one message with words and another with your face. If you are busy, it is far more considerate that you tell the

other person rather than giving less than full attention. Simply say, "I most postpone this interview (or conversation) for a time until I can meet with you. Can we reschedule?" If it is an emergency, put aside what you're doing, and listen totally.

Other facial features which may be contradicting your verbal messages are your mouth and your eyebrows. Are you smiling at the same time you're attempting to correct and criticize? Are you frowning disapproval while patting a subordinate on the back verbally? Have you wrinkled your eyebrows demonstrating concern while uttering those, "Things are going well" words? If you are, you are probably being misunderstood.

Let your face support the words you are using. With members, as well as employees, mixed messages can be devastating. If you don't like what the member is saying, you are entitled to explain your feelings; if you do approve, express it with an open look and smile.

### Check Your Body Space

Human use of territory is fascinating. You move within prescribed boundaries. Think about how people's use of space has affected you. When someone tailgates you on the road, you feel they have invaded your territory. When someone enters your office and stands just inside the door, you think they're being timid. Your sitting at your desk, instead of getting up and inviting them in, enforces that timidity.

As you begin to understand how people use space, you see cues to attitude and meaning. For example, have you ever approached an employee and had him/her back away from you? If this has happened, it happened because you violated that person's body space.

The movement away from others elicits feelings of rejection universally, unless you explain why you are altering the distance. And keep this point in mind the next time you approach an employee for a conversation.

In a business environment, standing three to four feet from the other person while conversing is normal. First, this distance allows you to talk without being easily overheard. Second, it is a socially accepted and standard way of talking. By the way, standing closer to or further from also sends messages. Too close sometimes connotes sexual invasion; too far connotes hostility or aggression. When you talk, check your distance; avoid invading or ignoring the other's territory.

Another universal message in our culture is the one communicated by the movement towards another. If, indeed, you do not move out of your space as someone moves toward you, you have accepted the friendly gesture and countered it with one of your own.

An interesting characteristic of space usage is that people in our culture construe as arrogance or aggression the fact that you don't leave your space, but rather you expect others to walk into it. Here you are demonstrating that you always want to be in the command position of either accepting or rejecting the gestures of others.

The way you use your body space says a great deal about the way you think of yourself and a great deal about the way others will think about you. If you are willing to share your space with others, you demonstrate openness that speaks volumes. If you won't or can't share your space, you convey a message of rejection or dissatisfaction with others.

Remember, as a manager, you have position status over your subordinates. You may not think this exists, but it is a fact always in the minds of your subordinates. To rid yourself of that status barrier, you must advance into the territory of your subordinates, as much as is comfortable for them.

One closing point on the issue of body space is the fact that people form body space usage habits at very young ages. And frequently, we do not understand our space

usage habits. Neither are we cognizant of the fact that these habits, these behavior patterns we formed as children, transmit messages—they communicate. Our objective as managers must be to attempt to ensure that we are not sending mixed messages to our subordinates or our members.

People protect their spaces because they feel more comfortable in them. If you wish to give the employee the benefit of the doubt in a situation, or if you wish to convey a feeling of camaraderie, go to the employee's space. If on the other hand, you are going to discipline, go to a neutral territory, neither yours nor the employee's office. Choosing a neutral territory removes the space barrier to effective communication and allows both of you to concentrate on the issue at hand.

If a member comes to your office, always rise and greet him. This avoids the issue of "your space" and makes it neutral. You can change the whole dynamics of understanding in your conversations if you become sensitive to space usage.

#### Watch Your Gestures

Gestures are tricky things. As a matter of fact, there are no real, universal gestures. Not only do gestures differ from culture to culture, but also they differ geographically within a culture. The only universal thing which can be said about a gesture is: If you gesture openly, toward another person, open palms, arms out, you have made a friendly gesture.

The term "up tight" refers to the way the body is held when someone refuses to relax. It translates into coldness, hostility.

Gestures change with situations. Sometimes a gesture can be used to convey anger. At other times the same gesture communicates enthusiasm. Your ability to understand a gesture and to relate it to the context of the situation in which it was used improves your ability as a communicator.

The important point is to recognize that gestures too may be in conflict with the words you are sending to your employees. Be cognizant of the fact and take steps to guard against accidental misunderstandings.

#### Postures, Too, Portend

The way you stand, sit or in general hold yourself during a con-

versation sends signals to your audience. And posture too has some cultural signal differences. In the Orient, standing erect and at attention when talking with others is a gross mark of disrespect. A sign of respect during conversation in Japan is dropping your head slightly down. If someone in the United States dropped his head while conversing we would interpret the action as a sign of weakness or as a sign of indifference to us and our words. We read posture this way: When you stand straight up you're not just doing what mother taught you to do, you're also giving the impression of being alert, ready for action and full of energy. Whenever your head dips or drops to one side, you convey a message of a loss of confidence.

#### Final Points

Briefly, we've touched on several body movements which send messages. It is essential we understand our bodies and understand that bodies convey messages that may undermine our verbal messages. This body language is our emotional

language; our verbal language is our logical language. The emotional part of our communication is always more easily read by others with whom we communicate. Sometimes, in fact, our emotional language gives us away.

Try to get control of your emotional language. The messages your body sends control the messages others send back to you. It's easy for you to control your body language once you know what it means.

In today's working world, the bottom line in communication is honesty. Sometimes you may think you have been honest, but your body may have sent a different message. I urge you to try to make your non-verbal cueing consistent with your words. And, I'm convinced the best way to start the process is by taking periodic body checks.

*Editor's Note: Dr. Alma Baron is a professor at the Management Institute, University of Wisconsin Extension in Madison. She and her husband, Lee, have been members of Blackhawk Country Club for the past 15 years. This article will also appear in Vol. 1 No. 4 of the CMAA Badger Broadcast, edited by Bernd Sturm.*

## NOMINATIONS FOR OFFICERS & DIRECTORS ANNOUNCED

The WGCSA Nominating Committee has announced the following slate of candidates for office:

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Vice-President Roger Bell  
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