

Open Body Language: Optimizing Your Nonverbal Communication

Our words convey what we are thinking, but our eye contact, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice express what we are feeling in any given situation. Whether you are speaking in a clinical setting, delivering a formal presentation to a group of your peers or discussing medical findings with a patient, there may be a significant difference between what you say and how others hear you. This difference arises from how your nonverbal communication—your “body language”—is interpreted. Most people are largely unaware of how others view them and what messages their body language projects.

The power of body language is illustrated by the emotional response it elicits from listeners. Feelings drive our reactions in virtually every situation, including when we are listening to someone present information. A listener’s interpretation of nonverbal cues can either strengthen or undermine the overall impact of the speaker’s information. The listener will receive mixed messages when the speaker’s gestures are in alignment with verbal content.

In an ideal world, we would be able to control every nonverbal message we transmit when speaking. Although this level of control may not be possible, increasing our understanding of the signs and signals we exhibit while speaking will strengthen our awareness of what we communicate to others. The best way to improve nonverbal communication is to learn open body language, which is characterized by four main components: direct eye focus, open body posture, open and purposeful hand gestures and a favorably expressive voice.

The key feature of open body language is eye contact. The ability to connect with the audience is enhanced if you slow the shift of your gaze to incorporate the time it takes to impart complete, discrete ideas. This technique helps regulate the flow of information. Slower-paced eye movement gives the audience an impression of confidence, interest, credibility and sincerity. Conversely, poor eye contact, such as scanning the audience or staring at only one spot, projects an image of nervousness, deception and tension.

To provide a strong base for effective communication, adopt an overall open body posture. This communicates a sense of authority while also projecting approachability, confidence and comfort. An open body posture features:

- keeping movement away from the body’s vertical center line;
- placing your feet hip-distance apart with your weight equally distributed;

- keeping your hands open and down at your sides;
- relaxing your shoulders; and
- leaning forward slightly.

The ability to connect with your listeners, capture their attention and facilitate their understanding strengthens with the use of open and purposeful hand gestures. Hand gestures act as a visual aid that can demonstrate the size of an incision, the shape of a medical device or even the distance among stages of disease development; they also can subtly express emotion about the topic under discussion. Failure to use gestures gives the impression that you are stiff, uncomfortable and anxious.

Poor eye contact, such as scanning the audience or staring at only one spot, projects an image of nervousness, deception and tension.

The qualities of your voice as you deliver your presentation also greatly affect how the audience perceives the spoken information. The sound and timbre projected by your voice will convey how you feel about the information being shared. By controlling the speed, volume, tone, pitch and energy of your voice, you can alter the way the audience interprets and understands your messages.

Regardless of whether the information being communicated is a complicated clinical discussion or a simple conversation, it is important to understand what nonverbal messages reveal. When our words have one meaning but our body language conveys another, our intended message suffers. By consciously using direct eye focus, open body posture, open and purposeful hand gestures and a favorably expressive voice to reinforce your words, you will increase the impact of your communication and decrease the likelihood of miscommunication.

—Dalli Simmons

Dalli Simmons, certified school psychologist, is a consultant at Exec|Comm LLC, a New York City-based communications consulting firm, where she coaches medical professionals, scientists and senior-level executives in a wide array of communication skills.

She can be reached at dsimmons@exec-comm.com.

