The Smallest Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Improve business communication with winning body language.

QUICK OVERVIEW

Gestures, facial expressions and postures often tell a far more accurate story than the words we utter. Ineffective body language can make communication hard to understand and have a negative impact on your business and personal life.

*Winning Body Language*, perhaps one of the most comprehensive books on the power of nonverbal communication on the market today, shows readers how to implement body language practices that build trust and, ultimately, success.

Author Mark Bowden advances the power of body language beyond the lightweight “sit up straight and succeed” etiquette lessons common for this topic. What Bowden lays out could be graduate-level curriculum, but don’t let that intimidate you. The book’s structure allows readers to delve deeply and thoroughly digest the subject matter, or skip ahead to quick-study chapter summaries, action lists and case studies evocative of common business experiences.

No matter how you choose to utilize this book, one thing is for sure: You’ll understand far better the impact body language has on business and personal communications, enabling you to make improvements, and to succeed.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

The value in understanding body language isn’t in deciphering it, but rather using its intrinsic power to make verbal communication easier to understand. Whether you are presenting to a client or in frank discussion with your spouse, appropriate body language can make the difference between yes and no. It

SUCCESS Points

*In this book you’ll learn that:*

- Effective communication improves the health of your organization, your company, your wealth and your well-being.
- People who give status and advantage to others willingly are seen as having enough to give away.
- Without effective communication, it’s totally impossible to organize people.
- People need to see your face to know more of what you are saying.
- Symmetrical, bilateral gestures make verbal communication easier to understand.
takes a little study, some thought and rehearsal, but it’s a manageable addition to your skill set that pays off quickly.

Practice makes perfect and here are three ways to get started:

• Your most balanced center of gravity resides in the TruthPlane—that area of your torso just above the navel. Hands placed in this area counterbalance your body’s natural stress reactions. When presenting, use “giving” rather than “taking” gestures originated in the TruthPlane and you’ll drive home trustworthiness to any audience.

• Imagine a string in the crown of your head, lifting your body. Your heels stay put, but your spine elongates. Your breathing takes on a different character. It is not rushed or shallow. This condition is known as the “in breath” and this posture increases the energy in you, your presentation and your audience. Try it.

• Put a vocabulary of purely positive words on an internal loop and take a walk. Notice how people are drawn to you and make more frequent eye contact. You’re exuding a YesState aura, which says you are open, accepting and inviting others to you.

All across the planet right now, leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals of all kinds are stating their case in boardrooms, on stages, on TV, in meeting halls, in corridors, at networking meetings, and at lunches.

They come to present, and because there is very little hard information on how the communication will pan out for sure, positively or negatively, their ancient brain takes over and the primal pessimism kicks in to ensure their best chance of survival—or so it thinks.

This means that presenters worldwide are in front of their audiences, thinking at a deep unconscious level, “There are other people here, and I don’t know for sure what is going to happen, so I’ll treat this as a threat—chances are that this will make me more likely to survive it.” Just like the prehistoric people of all our brains’ pasts, the sympathetic nervous system, a control mechanism for our body’s fundamental functions, initiates a response that is as familiar to us as it was to the first vertebrates on this planet: fight or flight.

So presenters are freezing, fleeing, or fighting their audiences in fright (and maybe even feinting too, or at least taking a sick day) because they cannot safely predict the outcome of an important communication exchange. And how can we tell that the majority of them are doing this as they speak? Next time you are watching a series of business presentations, watch the presenters closely. Do you see their hands down by their sides, their stomachs crunched in, and their shoulders down (hunched over), chin tucked in, forehead down and eyes narrowed? Do you see some repetitive movement from side to side? This is the human body getting ready either to avoid attack, to be attacked, or to attack. And this is unfortunately how the vast, vast majority of business communicators meet their audiences to a lesser or greater degree.

The human race’s business culture has introduced the format of “giving presentations” as a positive commercial tool, yet our old brains can’t recognize the personal benefit. When we get up there to present, we still feel that age-old...
fear of danger. So we protect ourselves with posture. Furthermore, we will angle ourselves side on to the audience to decrease the vulnerable surface area to attack, or maybe hide a little behind an object such as a podium, chair, or table, touching this object for security and positioning ourselves in relation to it as we would to a shield or a weapon. We can also unconsciously gravitate toward windows and doors to be sure that we are close to an exit.

Watch this behavior the next time you attend a presentation. More important, watch this behavior in yourself—it is natural, and you are predisposed to it. First recognize it, then, as you will find, you will be able to change it.

What’s more, the pack copies the leader. The audience copies the presenter. We “mirror” or copy others' actions and feelings and have faith in them through our own physical and emotional experience of them.

When human beings get together, they can often display a complex and rapid exchange of largely nonverbal information regarding their emotional states. In other words, we can detect what others are feeling and rapidly adjust our own thinking, feeling, physiology, and actions to precisely match the situation. Human beings at all ages are active in this sense.

**MAKE IT BIGGER AND KEEP IT TIDY**

You can make physical language great enough to create an essence that consumes attention, and that very quickly your audience can mirror, empathize with, and will be drawn into.

If you want your audience to get excited by your idea, well, get excited yourself. Make the choice to get emotionally involved, make that choice bigger (don’t get a little bit excited—get very excited), and keep it tidy (don’t add a splash of merriment or a hint of irony or an apathetic twist). Now decide on the movement to use with the audience. Make that choice and stick with it. Don’t back out halfway. Stay with the physicality you have prepared to communicate to your audience as a symbol of your intention for the desired effect. In this way you take pure movement to the audience for the outcome you want and not mental intentions that will soon be lost from the conscious mind in the heat or anxiety of meeting them face to face—never making it to solid actions.

You can quickly form a “tribe,” with your audience emulating you as the speaker, and emulating not just simple movement, but the vision that it represents. Though this focused, magnetic process of physical and emotional mimicry is technically primal and primitive, we are now well beyond the primates in how we can use it when we are communicating important messages—any monkey could copy another monkey reaching for a banana, but only a human, with our developed mirror neuron system and advanced right-brain imagery and metaphor system, can copy reaching for the stars.

**Evolved Influence**

Advanced understanding of the evolution of communication and our predisposition to learn through mimicking can help us understand how humankind’s highest cultural talents are not nature but nurture. For humans, everything can be communicated, and therefore everything can be learned. That is why communication is of the utmost importance to humankind.

Your greatest business achievements will boil down not to a genetic disposition for success, but to your ability to handle the information that you give and receive in such a way that it is distilled into valuable meaning for other human beings: intelligent communication.

**BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION**

Whether you are communicating with one person in a room or with many people in a meeting, the fewer barriers there are between you and your audience, the better for persuasion and influence. Here are some further ideas for controlling space to your advantage.

- Take away the table between people.
- Seat yourself at the corner of the table at a 90 degree angle to the other party.
- Balance the height advantage against the height dominance.
• Put yourself a few people away from key decision makers; having a safe barrier between their seated positions and you standing, they will feel protected and more relaxed.
• Think about placing (decision makers) to your left. Doing so can cause the image of these powerful people to be processed in the more creative part of your mind; thus, you will be able to interpret consciously any of their body language as having more opportunity—being more positive.
• Orchestrate who sits where, depending on the strategy you have for whom you need to influence.
• Focus on influencers and decision makers.

Moving Your Audience
Anyone who wants to build trust in business simply must have the capacity to influence human decision making—to be a great persuader. Such a person must have the ability to modify the actions of others in accordance with his own desires. As modern depth psychology has shown, the human unconscious mind expresses itself in images, metaphors and symbols rather than in words of concrete meaning. If you wish to have a conversation with your own and your audience’s unconscious master, in order to influence it at the deepest levels, you must use the same. With nonverbal influence and persuasion techniques, you are physically, vocally and environmentally expressing images, metaphors and symbols that can quickly move people through a progression of deep changes—whether it be toward a new feeling, a new thought, or a new physical place.

Not by coincidence, the idea of moving an audience through a progression of changes is also the function of a story or a narrative. Without change, there is no story. So in order to take an audience on a journey to a new feeling or thought, and furthermore, to persuade its members to make decisions that are in line with your own goals, you have to take them through some changes in their own physicality.

STORYTELLING
HOLLYWOOD STYLE

Just take a look at the classic structure of a Hollywood film, a perfect example of the modern version of storytelling. Syd Field, one of the most popular screenwriting gurus of recent years in the film industry, has written several books on the subject of story structure. In his articulation of the ideal “three-act structure,” he describes how a film must begin with “setup” information (Act One); only after this can the protagonist experience the “inciting incident” that gives her a goal, which must then be achieved. The protagonist’s struggle is to achieve this goal, the “confrontation” (Act Two), is a more subtle turning point with an often devastating reversal of the protagonist’s fortunes. The final element (Act Three) of the film depicts a climactic struggle by the protagonist to finally achieve her goal and the aftermath of this struggle.

Let’s look at a business message that you are delivering to a group that, although its members are already working well together, needs further motivation to keep doing well—to stay ahead of the game.

The Setup
The setup of the story is, “Things are going great.” To move things along further, you might drop in this comment, which acts as the inciting incident: “But when we look over our shoulders, we can see the competition, not only coming to take away the extra resources that we have accumulated, but threatening the very foundations upon which all of this is built!” This story structure is compelling because it swiftly takes the audience from pleasure to pain—in essence, the common Hollywood dramatic model.

We needed words to help us deliver the inciting incident, but it takes rock-solid body language skills to get the message across fully and inspire the audience to react appropriately. We physically move our listeners from pleasure to pain along with this verbal narrative.

The Confrontation
The first part of this presentation or speech—we’ll call it “You’re Great!”—can be performed starting in the TruthPlane because you are stating a fact: it is great that the team is great at what it does, and its members should rightly be praised. (In the TruthPlane, hand gestures move horizontally, starting from the navel.) They trust this message that they see in the TruthPlane, and they will continue to listen because they are gaining status and their brain’s reward system will be delivering pleasure to them. You can
choose to increase the level of excitement in this first part of your speech—raise their heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure—by bringing your gestures up into the PassionPlane when you are describing the team’s achievements and how it has exceeded expectations (because you started your speech in the TruthPlane, this will seem like a natural progression, rather than an exaggeration).

Moving into the PassionPlane at this stage is particularly advantageous in the context of applying our Hollywood story structure to this communication: raising the energy and passion just before the drop that is about to come will maximize the effect—both physically and emotionally—of the inciting incident. In the PassionPlane, your hands come up to your chest area. Gesturing from the chest area literally raises your oxygen level and so your energy level, gets your blood pumping from your heart, and compels those around you to do and feel the same. Your audience is receiving its reward, and your increased excitement is adding further positive stimulation to the reward processes in the brain. Now, just as those in your audience are getting hooked on the increased levels of their own dopamine, you are going to drop a bombshell and send them into withdrawal, both physically and mentally.

Lack of communication means lack of opportunity and loss of profit.

The Climactic Struggle

Now you have entered the final part of the three-act structure. Drop your actions back down to the TruthPlane, and let the audience know that there is a problem. People don’t generally like problems when they are confronted with them directly; they can switch off mentally as an avoidance of the threat, or even mentally downplay their own involvement (sidestepping the issue or passing the buck.) To avoid this outcome, we’ll use a device based on the Zeigarnik effect. Bluma Zeigarnik was a Russian psychologist who, in the 1920s, discovered the principle that explains that an unfinished idea sticks in the mind better than a finished one. Zeigarnik’s principle basically means that you can keep an audience hooked by saying, “There is a solution, which I will talk about once you understand just how severe the problem is.”

At this point, you lower your arms, with your hands dropping below your waist to the GrotesquePlane. Now you can go into the negative details. Since you have been in the TruthPlane prior to this, confirming facts that the audience knows to be true, you will have established trust. The audience members will now emotionally follow your drop into the GrotesquePlane and be likely to take your bad news seriously. They can hear the tone of your voice and see your body. They can see the physical change that this story is making in you, and they begin to copy it. The change is stark enough to cause them to be withdrawn from their pleasurable state. They now demand the restoration of the good feeling they had been in previously. They want you (and, by extension, themselves) to get back up to truth and passion—and away from the grotesque.

When you next lay down the solution for them, moving back into the TruthPlane, they immediately follow, willingly joining in with this new feeling and buying into the solution you propose. You can once again take them with you back toward and into passion as you describe the great results that they will have once again from their now-renewed extra effort.

Persuasive

In following this structure, you are using nonverbal communication to cause an audience to motivate itself: you are producing a compelling physiological imperative that assigns greater meaning to the less tangible business imperative. In other words, the potential pain of losing business opportunities is not as tangible as the current discomfort caused by the withdrawal of pleasurable chemicals in the brain that your nonverbal messages are instigating. By overlapping these nonverbal cues with your verbal content, you have effectively attached the feeling of pain to the business prognosis—and now the potential for pain makes sense because it feels real, and feeling is reality because it is the meaning that we attach to whatever we sense.

You are now using body language to create emotional meaning around the words and linguistic images that you are creating.
ACTION STEPS

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by putting what you’ve learned into action. Here are a few questions and thoughts to help you get started.

1. Ask yourself what you can do for people who may be losing trust in you. What happens when you take immediate action to win it back?

2. Decide what outcome you want from a communication, make that outcome even greater, and do not add any more outcomes.

3. Decide what you physically need to project to achieve an outcome, make that physicality bigger, and do nothing more.

4. Keep hands above your waistline to increase audience energy, let them drop to your sides and stand still to decrease energy.

5. Relax your audience by relaxing. Excite your audience by raising your own tension.

6. In a business presentation setting, decrease antagonistic behavior by mixing up adversarial groups with each other.

7. Take the audience members on a clear physical journey that persuades them to act upon your advice.

About the Author

Mark Bowden combined a degree in performance with gesture-control studies at Jacques Lecoq’s Laboratory of Movement in Paris and the influence techniques of Dr. Milton Erickson to create the TruthPlane, a unique model of training for anyone who communicates with an audience.

Considered one of the world’s expert performance trainers, Bowden teaches persuasive and influential verbal and nonverbal language and communication structures through group business presentation trainings and keynote addresses worldwide. His focus: to stand out, win trust and profit.

Bowden’s client list includes leading businesspeople, presidents, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and prime ministers of G8 powers. Universities, like McGill and the international top ten business school Schulich at York University in Toronto, seek his expertise as well.

Beyond business and politics, Bowden has worked with groundbreaking theater companies, appeared in multi-award-winning stage and screen productions, and trained internationally recognized actors and directors.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of Winning Body Language, you may also enjoy:

Influencer: The Power to Change Anything  
by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Al Sitzler, Ron McMillan, David Maxfield

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable  
by Patrick Lencioni

What Color Is Your Brain?  
by Sheila Glazov