

1

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2

Operations

3

Administration

4

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# 10 Secrets to Body Language Literacy

By Rachel E. O'Connell



» Are you fluent in body language? Use *SN's Rosetta Stone* to crack this code of nonverbal communication

“Actions speak louder than words.” We certainly know this to be true when it comes to how we treat others or in the consequences of various behaviors. But this idiomatic expression also applies to how we communicate, says Vanessa Van Edwards, behavioral investigator and author of *Captivate: The Science of Succeeding with People*. In fact, according to Van Edwards, up to 93% of human interaction is nonverbal. This means that references about the power of first impressions ring true as well, which is why you should consider *all* the ways that you make an impression on customers, coworkers and supervisors.

It's said that people who display positive body language cues (such as natural eye contact, strong handshakes and good posture) are seen by others as more likeable, competent, socially engaged and empathetic. In a customer service environment, such as school nutrition, whether those are *accurate* attributes, is less important than leaving this positive first impression.

What messages are being conveyed by your body's language? You may feel upbeat and excited to be at work, but your resting facial expression makes you look tired or angry. If you are constantly rubbing your arms simply to keep off a chill, you may be seen by others as closed off and withdrawn. Conversely, when you smile, stand up straight and pull your shoulders back, your customers or coworkers often will respond in a similar fashion.

David Matsumoto, PhD, is a renowned expert in the field of microexpressions, gestures, nonverbal

behaviors, culture and emotion. “Facial expressions of emotion are universal. Everybody around the world regardless of race, culture, nationality, gender, etc.... all show the same facial muscle expressions when we have the same emotions,” he explains. An unhappy, upset or even sarcastic expression on your face will be universally understood by *anyone* who sees it.

It is important, therefore, not just to gain an understanding of your personal body language defaults, but to actively work toward demonstrating *positive* body language and facial expressions in the workplace. *SN* is here to help you crack the code! What *are* body positions that are considered positive? Which ones might be misconstrued? This article offers 10 tips to help you translate. Get ready to see how putting a bounce in your step (instead of a slump in your walk) will give your work day (and maybe your career!) a big boost.

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**1. DO: MAKE EYE CONTACT.** When interacting with another person, you look at them in order to convey that you are paying attention. Conversely, if you want that person to listen when *you* speak, you cannot stare at the floor. What's the "perfect" amount of eye contact? Zero eye contact is *not* an option—beyond that, the answer lies in being cognizant of the difference between "sticky-eye" and "super glue-eye."

As disconcerting as it is to have a conversation with someone who makes no eye contact, it's equally uncomfortable to speak with someone who *never* looks away and super-glues their focus on you. Think of the perfect amount of eye contact like a shoe stepping on a sticky patch on the floor—when the shoe touches, the surfaces stick momentarily, but then the shoe moves on.

It has been proven that holding eye contact while speaking, especially while conducting a presentation, has a positive effect on your ability to persuade, while lack of eye contact tends to imply either that you are lying or that you are unsure of yourself.

**2. DO: PRACTICE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT.** You shouldn't view body language as solely reactionary. That is, it can be much more powerful as an *active* engagement tool. This is because we naturally engage with others through mirroring the behavior that we observe. Mirroring demonstrates interest and active listening; it is a *subtle* practice. Also known as the "chameleon effect," this is much more than a silent game of Simon Says. Humans "mirror" on a natural basis all of the time—if someone smiles in conversation, you smile back; if someone sits down, you are likely to begin to feel awkward standing, and usually sit nearby.

There are other ways to use your body for active engagement. You might crouch down to speak with children on their level. Nodding is a simple signal that doesn't have to indicate agreement, as much as it conveys the fact that you are hearing the other person's comments. When you are consistent in these types of exchanges, it helps to build trust.

**3. DON'T: SLOUCH.** Your mother told you slouching was bad for you (and so did Julie Andrews in "The Princess Diaries"). They were right—for multiple reasons, including the fact that slumping can affect your mood and, thus, the messages you send to others. In one research study, subjects who sat upright had higher self-esteem and better moods, while those who slouched exhibited a lower self-esteem and a lack of confidence.

Slumped or hunched shoulders send signals that you are closed off from others, literally turned inward. The impression is that you are trying to make yourself smaller—as though you'd rather not be where you are. Conversely, a strong stance, sitting or standing tall, shoulders relaxed and feet even with your hips instills confidence and carries the mark of a leader—and it won't take long for others to notice!

**4. DON'T: CROSS YOUR ARMS** This is a controversial position. Many experts profess that it sends an impression that you are defensive, effectively "shielding" yourself from other opinions or remarks. Some contend that it is about masking insecurities;

the position makes one feel less exposed and less vulnerable. Still others maintain that crossed arms is simply a position of personal comfort! It also can be interpreted as a power pose that is intended to make an individual look larger and more intimidating (think: a bouncer outside a music club). And, as a 2014 article in *Psychology Today* asserts, "Let's face it: Sometimes we do it just because it's cold."

What's important is that you build self-awareness about your tendency to use this pose and recognize how it might be perceived by others. If you are engaged in a conversation with your boss about your performance or a parent about a concern, do a self-check of your stance. If you've naturally reverted to crossing your arms, consciously uncross them and hold something in your hands. Don't risk sending a message you didn't intend.

**5. DO: OFFER A FIRM HANDSHAKE** Do you really want another's first impression of you to be a limp or sweaty handshake? Instead, when you grasp their hand, make sure that you hold on firmly, but not too firm; you aren't trying to break anyone's hand. You want to demonstrate confidence and ability.

But there's more to this universal greeting than the amount of pressure in your grip. Whether you're meeting a parent or networking at SNA's Annual National Conference, you should approach the other individual with good posture. Make steady, sticky-eye contact, as you extend your hand. This indicates that you are interested in building a rapport right from the get-go.





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**1. Up to 93% of human interaction is \_\_\_\_.**

- verbal                       nonverbal  
 cultural                       emotional

**2. \_\_\_\_ eye contact is considered an ideal  
in nonverbal communication.**

- Zero  
 "Super Glue"  
 "Sticky"  
 Blink-suppressant

**3. "Mirroring" is also known as the "\_\_\_\_  
effect."**

- reflective                       Narcissus  
 twin                               chameleon

**4. Sitting upright boosts self-esteem and  
overall mood.**

- True                               False

**5. Even if intended simply for comfort,  
crossed arms over the chest can  
make you seem \_\_\_\_.**

- defensive  
 insecure  
 intimidating  
 all of the above

**6. Broca's area is a part of the brain that  
processes smell and taste.**

- True                               False

**7. \_\_\_\_ can give others a negative impression  
about your attentiveness.**

- Playing with your hair  
 Using a fidget spinner  
 Tapping the table  
 All of the above

**8. Body language is head-to-toe  
communication—even your feet "say"  
something.**

- True                               False

**9. A human smile \_\_\_\_.**

- always turns a frown upside down  
 can calm an angry cat  
 makes you more memorable  
 all of the above

**10. Positive body language increases \_\_\_\_  
and decreases \_\_\_\_.**

- estrogen, testosterone  
 adrenaline, melatonin  
 testosterone, cortisol  
 estrogen, cortisol

**6. DO: GESTURE.** Broca's area is the name for a part of the brain that is associated with speech processing. Researchers who have studied it have discovered a link between physical gestures and vocal speech. When you use gestures or pantomime while speaking, it can help clear the mind, reducing hesitancy and the use of filler words (like "um" or...well, "like"). It's a very helpful form of body language.

**7. DON'T: FIDGET.** Conversely, fidgeting will *not* help you to express yourself—it may even muddy the conversational waters. If you get caught up in playing with your hair, biting or obsessively examining your nails, tapping the table or playing with an item of clothing, it can come across as nervousness, boredom or impatience. (Those popular fidget spinners won't do much to change another's negative impression of you either.)

Similarly, guard against dramatic gestures or elaborate hand movements. These can create a sense of frenetic chaos or anxiety. If you want to appear powerful and assume a leadership role, take a look at leaders you admire—they don't flail or fidget.

**8. DO: POINT YOUR FEET.** Body language is a head-to-toe communication exchange. Whether consciously or sub-consciously, we humans tend to pay attention to an entire physique, including (that's right) the position of someone's feet. Are you ready for your feet to be summarily judged?

Think of your feet like a bicycle or a car—the direction they are pointed in is the direction they will go. So, if your supervisor is talking to you about some extra work that needs to be done before the end of the day, and your feet are pointed toward the exit, she or he is given the subliminal message that you're not really interested in helping—you're ready to make tracks. It's another reason for a top-down scrutiny of your body language. If your feet are attentive, so are you.

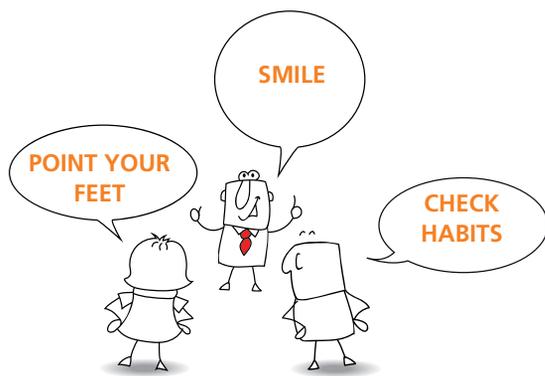
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**9. DO: SMILE.** “A warm smile is the universal language of kindness.” It’s impossible to argue with this inspirational maxim from writer William Arthur Ward. Whether it’s a lonely child picking up his lunch or a harried coworker troubleshooting the latest crisis, they all will welcome and respond to the kindness inherent in a smile. Some

research suggests that humans (with good eyesight) are capable of spotting a smile from 300 feet away—the length of a football field.

A smile usually elicits a positive response from the other individual—that mirroring effect referenced in #2 at work! This, in turn, can change *that* person’s emotional state. Every time we smile, we increase activity to the part of the brain that triggers positive emotions. Your smile makes another smile—and then we’re all feeling good! Smiling can also make us more memorable. Researchers at Duke University found that the reward center of the brain was active when subjects were learning and recalling the names of *smiling* individuals.

**10. DO: CHECK YOUR PERSONAL HABITS.** You are used to you. But are you aware of personal habits that might deter others from seeking your company? Maybe you’re the cashier who constantly smacks her lips. Perhaps you’re unconscious of the squeaking sound your Crocs make as you cross the cafeteria floor. Maybe you have a habit of heaving a sigh at regular intervals or checking your watch obsessively—even in front of your supervisor or students.

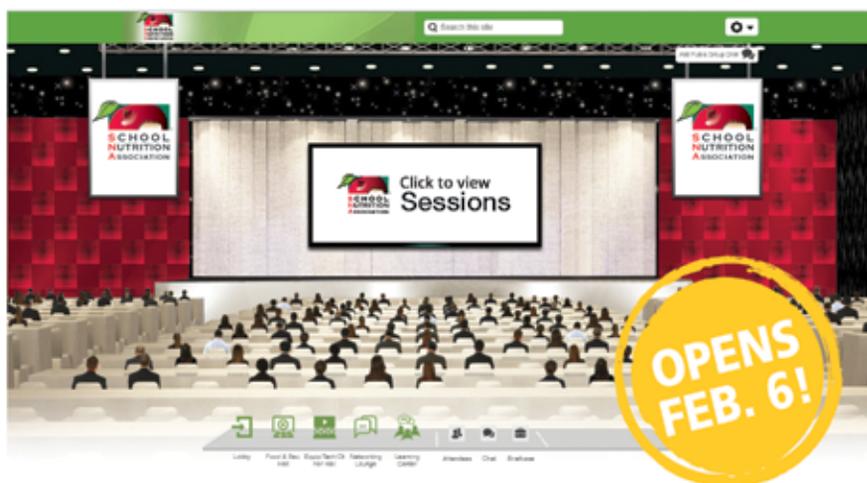
We’re not asking you to change your personality entirely. But raising your self-awareness is always a good step in ensuring that your personal habits are neither offensive nor distracting to others.

A Harvard University study found that when individuals used positive body language, testosterone levels (in both men and women) *increased* by 20% and cortisol, a stress hormone, *decreased* by 25%. These two factors coupled together create a powerhouse for confidence, reduce negativity and increase productivity. This generates even more success and confidence, forming a cycle of achievement that benefits the entire school nutrition team. **SN**

*Rachel O’Connell is SN’s communications & marketing coordinator.*



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