



LOUDER THAN WORDS

By Linda Talley

You've got plenty of great things to say. Make sure that your body language doesn't betray your message.

Every time you take the platform in front of an audience, your body language speaks loudly and clearly. Smile sheets or evaluations won't help if you don't know what your body is saying that your mouth is not. You must understand what you say without words to eliminate mental, physical, and emotional barriers between yourself and your audience members.

If you are experiencing a communication breakdown during a training program, it is crucial to objectively identify the reasons why. Too often, I hear trainers say that a habit originated with another person or with the audience, but is that really true?

To overcome the obstacles that can break a connection with the audience, you need to understand and use body language to your advantage to gain more self confidence, become more productive in front of the audience, and create a bond that brings participants back. Understanding body language is about more than just staying competitive in the training business. It's about creating a powerful advantage, and at the same time, building relationships with your audience members.

Defensive positions

Are you using the training manual as a barrier? If you hold it tightly in front of you, people are looking at the barrier rather than at you, and the manual holds more power than you do. I attended a meeting where the president of the group stood in front of the audience for 45 minutes and talked about



the benefits of joining the organization. The entire time, she grasped a notebook to her chest. She never referred to it, never opened it, and there was no reason for her to be clinging to it.

After her presentation, I asked her why she took the notebook to the platform with her, and she said she didn't realize she had it. This is a defensive position that has become an unconscious habit. You can certainly hold the manual, but keep it to your side or on a table or lectern. Refer to it as often as you need, but don't let it block the connection with your audience.

Going to extremes

Are you holding your training guide in one hand and crossing the other arm over your chest? Many people say it feels comfortable to cross one arm over the chest and hold it in this manner. Again, it may be comfortable for you,

but it sends a nonverbal message to your audience that could distract them from hearing what you are teaching. I have observed both men and women use this defensive position, and there's no need for it.

If the arm holding the manual needs support, make your arm stronger by lifting weights. If you don't think you must go to that extent and you want to do something with your other arm or hand, other than simply letting it hang by your side, here are some suggestions: Put your other hand on your hip. It takes up more space, and you are perceived as more powerful. Rest it on the lectern or podium, or alternately, rest it on the back of a chair.

Do not put your hand into your pocket or behind your back. When you do either one of these, people will be wondering what's behind your back or what's in your pocket rather than

focusing on what you have to say. For many men, putting a hand or two hands in their pockets happens naturally. You see similar gestures on TV. Men should pay attention when an actor puts his hand in a pocket and think about where the eye travels. Is that where you want your audience members' eyes to travel when you are training? No.

After a half day of training, when your feet, legs, and lower back are tired, should you sit down on a table, in a chair, or cross legs or ankles? It's comfortable, no doubt, but what message does it send to your audience? Crossing your legs is a defensive position used for comfort. It's comfortable, but it's also a barrier to the audience. Take a seat, if necessary, but keep your feet flat on the floor, with your legs and ankles uncrossed. Women who wear a dress and sit down during the training should consider wearing pants so it will be easier to sit without crossing your legs.

The eyes have it

What about eye contact? Eye contact can be used to control audience members or to make a connection with the audience. Which way do you use it? Avoiding eye contact is a way to discipline rude audience members. It's also the way a novice trainer handles the pressure of the platform. It is generally accepted that the person who maintains the longest eye contact is viewed as the person in charge. Two to four seconds of eye contact is acceptable to make an audience member feel visible. If you gaze longer, it could mean intimidation or intimacy. Both are acceptable, yet as a trainer, which message do you want to convey?

Watching where you place your hands

Hand movements are another source of audience communication. Pointing a finger is never a good idea, even if you are calling on an audience member or identifying someone with a question. The hands should always be in the palm-up position when doing this.

It may feel awkward at first, but facilitators should adjust to it. This is why

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many people, particularly politicians, hold their thumb next to the forefinger to avoid pointing. If you want to make a point, make sure the palms face the audience. If you use this metaphoric gesture too often, it will wear out your audience members, so use it only to make key points. If you want to get others involved, use community hands—whereby the palms are facing upward or toward each other as you motion toward your audience.

Staying on message

You must be on the lookout for mixed messages, not only when you are on the platform but whenever you leave the house. For example, while checking into a hotel the night before a conference, a speaker at the front of the line was shouting at the desk clerk, demanding that he better get a nonsmoking room or else. Imagine the impression any conference attendees in his session might take away from that episode. You never know when and where you will run into your audience members, and you don't want to leave them with a mixed message. Whenever you leave



your house, keep in mind that you are on the platform, and your audience members may be watching you. Make certain that they see only what you want them to see.

Nonverbal communication is unique to each training session and each audience, and it is used as a way to create a community, because it builds relationships. You may have habits that make you feel comfortable in the training room, but do they make your audience members feel comfortable so that you can make the emotional connection with them? When you understand the nuances of body language, you become influential and you become a better trainer because you know how to make the connection with your audience.

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