

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2017 Edition

Feature

Body Language: The Window to a Wealth of Information

Pay closer attention to your candidates

Mae West, American actress, singer, playwright, screenwriter, comedian, and sex symbol, once said: "I speak two languages, Body and English."

As interviewers, we don't need to be sex symbols like Mae West. But, what we do need to know is how to speak "body". In other words, we need to be able to read the language that is being communicated by a candidate's body movements and gestures.

Body language, or non-verbal communication, plays a large role in any communication especially in employment interviews. Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA, conducted a study where he determined the verbal component of a face-to-face conversation to be less than 35%; this was compared to more than 65% for non-verbal or body language.

Peg Pickering, in her book, *How to Manage Conflict*, claims the split between verbal and non-verbal communication is even more dramatic. She asserts that 7% of all communication is verbal while 93% is non-verbal, although she does not provide any sources to support these numbers.

Whatever percentage you choose to accept, it's clear that we can't ignore the impact, positive or negative, conscious or subconscious, that body language has on communication. It's very significant.

Here are some tips you can use to read body language when conducting an employment interview:

- Look for mismatches between what the applicant is saying and what their body language suggests. For example, a person may say they are excited about the job but have a frown on their face.
- Ask questions about the non-verbal signals. Rudyard Kipling, the great British journalist and novelist, once said "I have six honest men and they taught me all I know. They are WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY and HOW." Use these six honest men and you will generate a host of questions that will almost certainly answer all of your questions about the candidate's body language.
- Lean forward when listening to show that you are fully engaged in the conversation.
- Be conscious of your facial expressions.
- Don't violate the interviewee's personal space.
- Eliminate distractions such as open windows that look out into heavy traffic ways, email notification sounds or interruptions such as people knocking at the door. Focus your attention on the interviewee.
- Smile.

Unfortunately, our body parts do not send universally identical messages. A body part may send one message in one culture or country and something completely different in another. It behooves the interviewer to know these differences; failure to do so could result in rather embarrassing moments.

Here are some examples of these differences.

- Head — Nodding the head signifies agreement in most societies. However, in places like Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey, a nodding head means "no".
- Eyes — In Western cultures we praise good eye contact. In Asian cultures it is not acceptable to look the other person in the eye. It is a sign of disrespect and considered a challenge.



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- Arms — Some cultures use their arms freely to make gestures. Others, like the Japanese, consider it impolite to gesture with broad movements of the arms.
- Handshaking — In Middle Eastern and some Asian countries, shake hands using the right hand. The left hand is considered dirty.
- Legs and feet — Sitting cross-legged in Asia and the Middle East is considered disrespectful. Resting the ankle over the other knee risks pointing the sole of your shoe at another person which is considered a rude gesture.
- The OK sign — In the West, the "thumb up" or "OK" sign means a good job. In Australia, New Zealand, and most African countries, it is an insult. The OK sign, where the thumb and forefinger form a circle, means fine or good in most cultures. However, in France and other European countries it means "zero" or "worthless".

Body language can provide you with a window into the candidate's background, experience and skill sets. Don't make assumptions on what you see and what you interpret it to be. Ask questions and gain information that will help you make a solid hiring decision that will benefit your organization.

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