



In Light Times

Is Your Body Language Sending The Wrong Message?

by Dr. Noelle Nelson

You're sitting in a meeting at work. Things are going well, the team adopted a number of your ideas, the boss nodded your way — "Good work!" But when it came time to put the team together to present the project to the client, guess who was left out? You. Again.

Obviously, your work is valued, and yet repeatedly, you are the one left behind in the office while others have all the fun with the client. "You're so good behind the scenes," is the only response you get to your "Why not me?" Since you don't want to be a whiner, you let it go.

Meanwhile, you drive home in a rotten mood, and do your best to lose the negative feelings before you walk in the door. Your daughter asks if you can take her to the mall Saturday to hang out with her friends.

"I don't know, honey," you say, "I'll have to check my day timer."

"Well you don't have to be mad about it!" your daughter exclaims.

You're shocked: "I'm not mad," quite sure you answered her pleasantly enough and not feeling angry at all.

"Oh no?" she retorts, "Look at you, you're standing there, your arms crossed, tapping your foot and scowling at me."

Sure enough, you are standing arms crossed, foot tapping and—that feels like a scowl you are wearing. You apologize, but as you walk away, you can't help but wonder "Is that how I come across at work? Is that why I'm not being included in client meetings?"

It could very well be. Only part of what we have to say comes from our mouths. A major portion of it comes through our body language. And when your body language is in contradiction to your words, your body is what will be believed first.

If you find yourself sitting slumped over at the conference table, head down, doodling as

others talk, you may not be perceived as the most appropriate company representative before clients, regardless of how brilliant your work. If you have a habit of walking around stoop-shouldered, tending not to look people in the eye when you speak, and have a habit of scratching behind your ears at odd moments, your boss may not think of you first when considering who to present that important project to the client.

And no wonder your daughter thought you were angry at her, despite the dulcet tones of your voice: arms crossed over chest, foot tapping and scowling are all interpreted as signs of anger or frustration, coloring whatever you may have to say.

Don't drag your body around like some unwanted fifth wheel. Your body is you, physically expressed, and it contributes in dynamic ways to your communication. Pay attention to what your body is saying: do you stand straight, square-shouldered, making good eye contact with the people you speak to? This body posture implies confidence, energy and honesty. Do you sit beside your daughter for important conversations, putting yourself at equal level with her, keeping your body still and making good eye contact? All these and many more are ways your body can support your communication, and make what you have to say heard the way you intend it to be.

Let's say you have something important to communicate, whether to your boss, a client or family member. You want to be sure your listeners understand both the importance of what you say and your conviction. Look to your posture. Is it a confidence-maker or confidence-breaker? Good posture is critical to expressing self-confidence. It convinces others that you know what you are talking about, which makes you more persuasive.

Good posture implies strength. The world, it seems, can sit on your square shoulders. You appear to be able to handle whatever may come your way; your back is strong and will not yield to every knock or blow. It is hardly coincidental that armies all over the world demand that their soldiers demonstrate erect posture: it symbolizes force and resilience in the face of adversity. Good posture implies energy. Your good posture is the mark of an energized person; you want to take on responsibilities, you are eager to demonstrate your competence. Good posture signals readiness, the energy to get things done now, rather than put them off to another day.

Good posture is basically an erect posture. Stand with your spine straight, neither slumped nor arched. If you slump you seem worn out and without energy. If you stand so erect that your back is arched, curving backwards, you can seem rigid or defensive.

Use this dancer's trick to help stand erect comfortably: stand with your feet about 8 to 10 inches apart, hands at your side. In your imagination, run a cord from the base of your spine, through your spine, up through your neck, and out the top of your head. Then pull the imaginary cord upwards. Feel your spine straighten. Once you get used to what it feels like to stand with good posture, you can easily translate that same posture to when you're sitting.

Appreciate the value that your body brings to the table, to your life — a wonderfully complex, beautiful part of your self-expression.

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