

We're all fascinated by body language. Most of the time, that means interpreting what someone else is showing us.

What does that gesture mean? Is he or she responding positively to me? Am I seeing truthfulness or lying? *Is any of this nonverbal behavior reliable information?*

Body Language and Public Speaking

If each of us is that interested in what other people are showing us, turn that situation around: What about when we're the one giving a speech or presentation? You've got it—your audience wants to know the same things about *you*, including:

- Are you trustworthy?
- Is what you're saying credible?
- Do you have the audience's interests at heart rather than your own?
- Are you a confident speaker?
- Can they believe in your message?

The list is actually much longer concerning how you're coming across and whether your message is resonating.

Clearly, you need to use body language powerfully to be credible and persuasive in the eyes of your audience.

Negative Body Language: The 7 Deadly Sins

Below are the 7 deadly ways speakers use "negative body language" to undermine their own credibility and influence. If you see your own behavior reflected here, it's time to take stock and start employing body language that helps rather than hurts your cause.

#1. Poor stance or posture. Audiences cue in on your sense of self-worth by how you hold yourself. Slumped shoulders and a caved chest indicate surrender, not a willingness to take on the world in a worthy endeavor. *"How you stand affects your standing with the audience."* Here's an easy yet effective exercise: Imagine a string leading from the top of your head into infinity. Someone is tugging gently and steadily on that string. Allow yourself to respond . . . and notice in a mirror how much more capable and confident you look!

#2. Avoiding eye contact. You know the variations of this one: the nervous speaker who talks to the floor. The PowerPoint user who has a cozy dialogue with the screen while ignoring the audience. The keynoter who has an excellent relationship with his notes and none with the

people in the seats. Or a presenter who reads those amazing invisible notes on the ceiling none of the rest of us can see. Trust is your most valuable commodity as a speaker. That attribute begins and ends with eye contact.

#3. Creating a barrier that shuts out listeners. This sin has many variations. Standing with arms crossed; the fig leaf position of hands in front of the crotch; creating a church steeple with one's fingers; "washing" the hands while speaking; even a gesture with palm outward toward the audience that seems to say, "Stop!" — Every one of these features a speaker creating a physical barrier in front of listeners. Let those arms remain at your sides, and bring them up to make a gesture that amplifies or supports your meaning. It will feel awkward at first, but you'll soon get used to it.

#4. Unproductive use of space. It's odd how we over-emphasize gestures in public speaking, and ignore space. An audience expects you to use space, not impersonate a statue. In fact, it's your job to *command* space. Using different parts of the stage tells an audience you're comfortable up there; and few performance techniques aid engagement like letting listeners know you're about to start a new point. If you stand in a different spot for each of those points, listeners will retain each one more reliably. Use your audience in terms of space as well, approaching them to answer questions or to "check in" frequently.

#5. Employing weak or repetitive gestures. "What should I do with my hands?" is a frequent question of anxious speakers. The answer is simple: a gesture should be an integral part of what you're saying—as Hamlet put it, "Suiting the action to the word, the word to the action." With that mantra in mind, it should actually become difficult to use too many gestures, since that particular gesture couldn't *possibly* fit that many expressions! The other half of this equation is the power and spareness of the gesture: each one you make should be strong, support the phrase, and cleanly end.

#6. Relating negatively to listeners. You've seen speakers accomplish this remarkable feat: Rather than cultivating influence with an audience, they antagonize them. Negative facial expressions, nodding impatiently at a questioner so they'll shut up so you can answer, pointing a stiff finger at the next unlucky questioner in line (instead of using a "welcoming" gesture), or even looking at the floor as you ponder your momentous reply even as they're still asking their question — these are clear indications that the speaker would rather be somewhere else. Pretty soon, of course, the audience will agree.

#7. Clumsy use of objects. You've seen the laser pointers that dance playfully close to an audience member's eyes; the writing instruments never once used in a presentation; the gravity-defying pieces of chalk; and the microphones blown into, held too close, or used as hand extensions for wild gestures. Speakers, like actors with props, need to use objects rather

than *being used* by them. At the very least, experiment with coming out from behind a lectern if possible, for a podium is the worst physical barrier of all. That's why I call it the "Devil's Tool."

This article was written by Dr. Gary Genard who is an expert in theater-based public speaking training. A stage actor and speech coach, Dr. Genard uses acting techniques to help speakers of all types influence audiences. Business executives, leadership teams, public figures, and professionals at all levels work with him for more dynamic speeches and presentations. Dr. Genard consults and trains for multinationals, governments, associations, nonprofits, small businesses and individuals worldwide. Clients include Citigroup, Pfizer, Procter & Gamble, the U.S. State Department and Congress, the United Nations, and many others. Dr. Genard completed his acting training at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and holds a Ph.D. in Theater from Tufts University in Massachusetts. He has served on the faculty at Harvard, Boston College, Tufts, Bentley University, and the University of Illinois.