

Five Ways to Make Your Body Speak

by

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Dr. Ralph C. Smeadly, the founder of Toastmasters International, wrote, "The speaker who stands and talks at ease is the one who can be heard without weariness. If his posture and gestures are so graceful and unobtrusive, that no one notices them, he may be counted as truly successful." When your actions are wedded to your words, the impact of your speech will be strengthened. If your platform behavior includes mannerisms unrelated to your spoken message, those actions will call attention to themselves and away from your speech. Below I have provided 5 ways you can rid yourself of your distracting mannerisms.

1. Rid Yourself of Distracting Mannerisms

Eliminate vocal and visual impediments.

Some common faults of inexperienced or in-effective speakers are:

- Gripping or leaning on the lectern
- Finger tapping
- Lip biting or licking
- Toying with coins or jewelry
- Frowning
- Adjusting hair or clothing

- Head wagging

These have two things in common:

- They are physical manifestations of simple nervousness.
- They are performed unconsciously.

When you make a verbal mistake, you can easily correct it, because you can hear your own words, but you can't see yourself, so most distracting mannerisms go uncorrected. You can't eliminate them unless you know they exist.

Videotape yourself.

The first step in eliminating any superfluous behavior is to obtain an accurate perception of your body's image. This should include:

- Posture
- Gestures
- Body movement
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact

The next step is to free yourself of physical behaviors that do not add to your speech. This can be accomplished by simply becoming aware of your problem areas. After you have videotaped yourself speaking, review the tape several times and make a list of all the distracting mannerisms you notice.

First review. Review your tape the first time without looking for mannerisms. Just listen to the presentation as if you were hearing it for the first time and evaluate the overall impact you experience from watching the tape.

Second review. Review your tape a second time (with the volume turned down) and look for visual distractions. Take notes on what you observe.

Third review. During this review, have the picture turned off and listen only to your voice. Many people have never even heard a taping of their own voice before. Become accustomed to listening to your voice. Get to know it as others

hear it. Note what you like and what you don't like. Pay attention to the speed, the volume, and the tone of your voice.

Once you have completed these reviews, go over the list of all the distracting mannerisms you saw and heard. The next time you are having a conversation with someone you know well, try to notice whether you use any of these distracting mannerisms even in casual circumstances. Tackle each of your negative points one at a time.

2. Build Self-confidence by Being Yourself

The most important rule for making your body communicate effectively is to be yourself. The emphasis should be on the sharing of ideas, not on the performance.

Strive to be as genuine and natural as you are when you speak to family members and friends.

Large vs. small audiences. Many people say, "I'm okay in a small group, but when I get in front of a larger group I freeze." The only difference between speaking to a small informal group and to a sizable audience is the number of listeners. To compensate for this, you need only to amplify your natural behavior. Be authentically yourself, but amplify your movements and expressions just enough so that the audience can see them.

3. Let Your Body Mirror Your Feelings

If you are interested in your subject, truly believe what you are saying, and want to share your message with others, your physical movements will come from within you and will be appropriate to what you are saying.

By involving yourself in your message, you'll be natural and spontaneous without having to consciously think about what you are doing or saying. For many of us, this isn't as easy as it sounds because it requires us to drop the mask that shields the "real self" in public.

To become an effective speaker, it is essential that you get rid of your mask and share your true feelings with your audience. Your audience wants to know how you feel about your subject. If you want to convince others, you must convey your convictions.

Speak from the heart and to the soul.

4. Build Self-confidence Through Preparation

Nothing influences a speaker's mental attitude more than the knowledge that he or she is thoroughly prepared. This knowledge leads to self-confidence, which is a vital ingredient of effective public speaking.

How many of us have ever experienced a situation in which we had not prepared well for a presentation? How did we come across? On the other hand, think of those presentations that did go well. These are the ones that we had properly prepared for.

5. Use Your Everyday Speaking Situations

Whenever you speak to people, make an extra effort to notice how you speak. Observe, too, whether the facial expressions of your listeners indicate they do or do not understand what you are saying. Before calling to request something on the phone, plan and practice what you are going to say. Even this is essentially a short presentation. Another exercise is to prepare a 90-second presentation about yourself. Describe who you are and what you do. Record your presentation and review it using the four steps described above.

Since you are talking about yourself, you don't need to research the topic; however, you do need to prepare what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. Plan everything including your gestures and walking patterns.

Facial Expressions

Leave that deadpan expression to poker players. A speaker realizes that appropriate facial expressions are an important part of effective communication. In fact, facial expressions are often the key determinant of the meaning behind the message. People watch a speaker's face during a presentation. When you speak, your face—more clearly than any other part of your body—communicates to others your attitudes, feelings, and emotions.

Remove expressions that don't belong on your face.

Inappropriate expressions include distracting mannerisms or unconscious expressions not rooted in your feelings, attitudes and emotions. In much the same way that some speakers perform random, distracting gestures and body movements, nervous speakers often release excess energy and tension by unconsciously moving their facial muscles (e.g., licking lips, tightening the jaw).

One type of unconscious facial movement which is less apt to be read clearly by an audience is involuntary frowning. This type of frowning occurs when a speaker attempts to deliver a memorized speech. There are no rules governing the use of specific expressions. If you relax your inhibitions and allow yourself to respond naturally to your thoughts, attitudes and emotions, your facial expressions will be appropriate and will project sincerity, conviction, and credibility.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is the cement that binds together speakers and their audiences. When you speak, your eyes involve your listeners in your presentation. There is no surer way to break a communication bond between you and the audience than by failing to look at your listeners. No matter how large your audience may be, each listener wants to feel that you are talking to him or her.

The adage, "The eyes are the mirror of the soul," underlines the need for you to convince people with your eyes, as well as your words. Only by looking at your listeners as individuals can you convince them that you are sincere and are interested in them, and that you care whether they accept your message. When you speak, your eyes also function as a control device you can use to assure your listeners' attentiveness and concentration.

Eye contact can also help you to overcome nervousness by making your audience a known quantity. Effective eye contact is an important feedback device that makes the speaking situation a two-way communication process. By looking at your audience, you can determine how they are reacting. When you develop the ability to gauge the audience's reactions and adjust your presentation accordingly, you will be a much more effective speaker.

How To Use Your Eyes Effectively

1. Know your material. Know it so well that you don't have to devote your mental energy to the task of remembering the sequence of ideas and words.

You should prepare well (remember to use the 9 P's) and rehearse enough so that you don't have to depend heavily on notes. Many speakers, no matter how well prepared, need at least a few notes to deliver their message. If you can speak effectively without notes, by all means do so. But if you must use notes, that's fine. Just don't let them be a substitute for preparation and rehearsal.

Even many experienced speakers use notes. Often, they take advantage of such natural pauses as audience laughter or the aftermath of an important point to glance briefly at their notes. To make this technique work, keep your notes brief. (See Chapter 6 for more on this topic.)

2. Establish a personal bond with listeners. How do you do this? Begin by selecting one person and talking to him or her personally. Maintain eye contact with that person long enough to establish a visual bond (about 5 to 10 seconds). This is usually the equivalent of a sentence or a thought. Then shift your gaze to another person.

In a small group, this is relatively easy to do. But, if you're addressing hundreds or thousands of people, it's impossible. What you can do is pick out one or two individuals in each section of the room and establish personal bonds with them. Then each listener will get the impression you're talking directly to him or her.

3. Monitor visual feedback. While you are talking, your listeners are responding with their own non-verbal messages. Use your eyes to actively seek out this valuable feedback. If individuals aren't looking at you, they may not be listening either. Their reasons may include one or more of these factors:

They may not be able to hear you.

Solution: If you are not using a microphone, speak louder and note if that works.

They may be bored.

Solution: Use some humor, increase your vocal variety or add powerful gestures or body movements.

They may be puzzled.

Solution: Repeat and/or rephrase what you have just said.

They seem to be fidgeting nervously.

Solution: You may be using distracting mannerisms. Maybe you have food on your clothes (or worse, maybe your blouse is unbuttoned or your fly isn't closed). Make sure you are aware of these embarrassing possibilities before and during your speech. If necessary, try to correct them without bringing more attention to them. On the other hand, if your listeners' faces indicate pleasure, interest and close attention, don't change a thing. You're doing a great job!

Your Appearance

If your listeners will have on suits and dresses, wear your best suit or dress - the outfit that brings you the most compliments. Make sure that every item of clothing is clean and well tailored.

Don't wear jewelry that might glitter or jingle when you move or gesture. This might divert attention from your speech. For the same reason, empty your pockets of bulky items and anything that makes noise when you move.

Part of the first impression you give occurs even before you are introduced to deliver your speech. As the audience arrives, your preparation should be concluded. You shouldn't have to study your speech. Instead, mingle with the audience, and project that same friendly, confident attitude that will make your speech a success.

When you speak-especially if you aren't well known to the audience-the most crucial part of your presentation is the first few minutes. During that initial segment, the audience will be making critical judgments about you. Your listeners will decide whether you are confident, sincere, friendly, eager to address them and worthy of their attention. In large measure, they will base this decision on what they see.

After your introduction, walk purposefully and confidently to the speaking position.

Walking Patterns

Why move in the first place?

Moving forces people to focus and follow you. The way you walk from your seat to the speaker's position is very important. When you are introduced, you should appear eager to speak. Too many speakers look as though they are heading toward execution.

Walk confidently from your seat to the lectern. Pause there for a few seconds, then move out from behind the lectern. As discussed before, it is wise to use the lectern as a point of departure, and not a barrier to hide behind.

Smile before you say your first words. Be careful not to stand too close to, nor move beyond, the people in the front row. Be careful not to walk too much. Doing so will work against you. Continuous pacing is distracting. Walking can be an effective way to stress an important idea. It is essential that your walk be purposeful and intentional, not just a random shift of position. Taking about three steps, moving at a shallow angle, usually works best.

When employing visual aids, use three positions. One position is your "home" position and should be front and center. The other two positions should be relatively near the "home" position. Never stand in front of any visual aid.

When you practice your speaking, make sure you also practice your walking patterns. Try walking to and from your three positions. These positions should be planned just as your hand gestures are.

When standing still, remember to maintain good posture. Stand up straight.

Remember it's not what you say, it's how you say it, and your body does speak very loudly. Only when you marry your verbal message and your nonverbal message do you begin to command presence as a speaker.
