



Body Language... Actions Speak Louder Than Words

By: F. Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA

This column is a tribute to Edwin L. Knetzger, Jr. – a remarkable leader and amazing communicator. Ed was a friend, role model and mentor until his death in December, 2003. He had a way of getting the best out of everyone through the manner in which he delivered his message. While he had a gift with the English language, it was his body language that created remarkable impact.

I first met Ed in my interview process at Johnson & Higgins in 1980. At the time, he was the Managing Director of Philadelphia's Brokerage Operations. Little did I know that he would assume the Presidency of the largest privately held insurance broker in the world only two years later. I so vividly remember his handshake, the sparkle in his eye, his warm smile and my first pat on the back. Ed had an amazing following. His family, friends and staff admired his every move. His style, grace and charisma were gifts that were appreciated by all. While Ed's accomplishments are too numerous to list in this column, his legacy is the lasting impact he had on those that worked for and with him.

Non-verbal communication is the process of communicating through sending and receiving wordless messages. Non-verbal signals have five times the impact of verbal signals. Like the spoken language, body language has words, sentences and punctuation. Each gesture is like a

single word and each word may have several meanings. Since non-verbal communication encompasses the vast majority of one's overall message, you must understand the impact of your body language, gestures, facial expressions, posture and movements. Body language is the outward reflection of your emotional state and condition.

The first scientific study of non-verbal communication dates back to 1872 when Charles Darwin authored *The Expression of the Emotions of Man in Animals*. Darwin argued that all mammals show emotion in their faces. The most widely referenced study was by Albert Mehrabian who pioneered the understanding of communication in the 1960s. It was Mehrabian whose research substantiated that only 7% of a message is verbally communicated, while 93% is non verbally transmitted. The bulk of communication comes across in appearance and body language, comprising 55%. Tone, speed and inflection of voice make up the remaining 38%.

Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell also played a key role in understanding the impact of non-verbal communication – what he called “kinesics.” Birdwhistell estimated that the average person speaks words for a total of about 10 to 11 minutes a day and the average sentence takes only 2.5 seconds. He also estimated that human beings make and recognize about 250,000 facial expressions per day. Like Mehrabian, he determined that the verbal component of a face-to-face conversation is less than 35% and that over 65% of communication is done non verbally.

An analysis of thousands of recorded sales interviews and negotiations in business encounters supports the findings of Mehrabian and Birdwhistell. Body language accounts for between 60% and 80% of the impact surrounding business negotiations. It is also interesting to note that you form your initial impression about people within 30 seconds. According to Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, first impressions may occur much faster – instantaneously or in two seconds.

If non-verbal communication encompasses the vast majority of your overall message, it would be prudent to step back and take a closer look at body language. This includes, but is not limited to, your attire, tone of voice, contact or lack thereof, gestures, open arms, crossed legs, clearing throat, etc. Even your choice of clothing, hair style, glasses, accessories have an impact. Your appearance communicates a strong message.

Not only is it important for you to be aware of your own body language, but equally important to understand what body language means so that you can effectively access and react to others. This is particularly helpful for producers and account managers who interact frequently with customers.

There are five key elements that can make or break our attempt at successful non-verbal business communication:

Eye Contact

Eye contact indicates interest, attention and involvement. A person's eyes are always “talking” and providing valuable clues. Good eye contact helps your audience develop trust in you, thereby

elevating you and enhancing your message. Poor eye contact does just the opposite. Research indicates that people rely on visual clues to help them decide on whether to attend to a message or not. If they find that you are not “looking” at them when they are being spoken to, they feel uneasy. It is essential that you engage every member of the audience by looking at them.

Gestures

A gesture is a non facial body movement intended to express meaning. Gestures may be articulated with hands, arms or body, and also include movements of the head, face and eyes such as winking, nodding or rolling your eyes. Often, gestures tell us something about a person or situation that is not communicated verbally.

In the business setting, consumers rely heavily upon your face and hands to draw conclusions about the passion and conviction you have toward your products and services.

Posture

Your posture tells a powerful, non-verbal story. Positive body posture transmits a message of authority, confidence, trust and power. Posture is understood through such indicators as direction of lean, body orientation, arm position and body openness. Studies indicate that a person who displays a forward lean or a decrease in backwards lean signifies positive sentiment during communication.

Smile and Laughter

People who laugh and smile, even when they don't feel especially happy, make their brain's left hemisphere surge with electrical activity. When you laugh, every organ in your body is affected in a positive way. As with smiling, when laughter is incorporated as a permanent part of who you are, it attracts friends, improves health and extends life.

The Power of the Touch

Researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted an experiment that became known as “the phone booth test.” They placed a coin on the ledge of the phone booth, hid behind a tree and waited for an unsuspecting subject to walk in and find it. When this happened, one of the researchers would approach the subject and say, “Did you see my coin in that phone booth? I need it to make another call.” Only 23% of the subjects admitted they had found it and gave it back. In the second part of the study, the coin was again placed in the phone booth, but when the researchers approached the people who took it, they touched them slightly on the elbow for not longer than 3 seconds and inquired about the coin. This time 68% admitted to having the coin, looked embarrassed and said things like, “I was looking around to try to see who owned it...” The power of the touch, whether it be your handshake, touch on the elbow, a high five or pat on the back demonstrates positive impact.

Understanding of the importance of eye contact, gesture, posture, touch, smile and laughter will allow you to enhance your level of communication. Your understanding of non-verbal communication will also allow you to be more “perceptive” in business settings. Being perceptive reflects your ability to spot contradictions between someone’s words and their body language. When in doubt trust the non-verbal communication – what you see. While words can be manipulated, body language is much harder to control.

When Ed Knetzger retired from Johnson & Higgins in 1985, he took an active role with Gallagher Knetzger, a marketing and communications company in the Philadelphia area. It was there that I once again had the opportunity to study his body language and to understand the magic of his communication. Ed was the master of using non-verbal communication to enhance relationships, management and communication. Thank you Ed Knetzger. Your legacy lives on.

About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine’s* “Entrepreneur of the Year” award as well as one of the “25 Most Innovative Agents in America.” Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.