



## ***What I Really Mean?***

*“Body language is an outward reflection of a person’s emotional condition”  
- The Definitive Book of Body Language -*

Non-verbal communication is an extensive subject. It covers the other 60-80% of our communication beyond our words. It can both reveal what we "really mean" as well as send signals contrary to our intended message. **Managing our non-verbal message is a key aspect of influence.**

Mastering body language and non-verbal communication is beyond the scope of a single white paper but what we can do is present key fundamentals and select situations targeted for technical professionals. We will build awareness of the key principles in non-verbal communication and learn to actively manage them during critical times. If you are interested in a deeper dive into body language, we recommend more resources at the end.

This paper makes an excellent quick reference prior to presenting or being part of a function, such as a meeting, where your influence is important. Keep it handy and review it often

Body language is a subset of non-verbal communication and covers how we manage:

- Appearance and posture
- Facial expressions and eye contact
- Space and touch
- Physical reactions to others

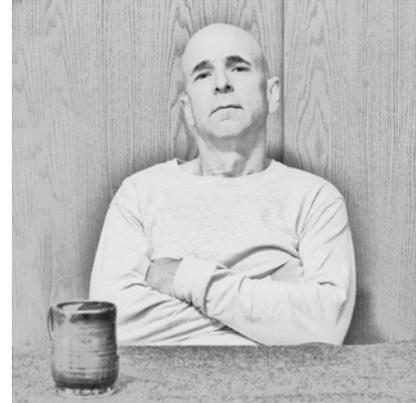
Non-verbal communication expands this list to include vocal tone, intonation and voice pattern.

To be effective in any social situation, business situation or any sort of relationship, we must manage our body language.

## **First, stop sending the wrong signals**

Perception is neither fair nor rational. Although people close to you may learn that you slouch and stare at the ceiling in meetings when you are listening the hardest, the vast majority of people who you need to interact with will not perceive you this way.

They may see your posture as callous disinterest and tag you as "arrogant" for not caring about them and their meeting. Your message will never match your intent, in any situation, if you focus only on what you are saying and not the full picture of what you communicate.



*Their perception is your reality*

Do you audit your body language on a regular basis in a variety of situations? **In our experience, unconsciously sending inconsistent or unwanted non-verbal signals are key inhibitors for technical professionals.** The second is probably sending a valid, but poor signal. Be aware of your body language and manage it with as much care as you do your words. This is key to influencing people.

A primary sign that you are sending the wrong signals is when people say you are something or you feel something that you are not saying or feeling. Common indicators that technical professionals are non-verbally miscommunicating:

- "People think you are arrogant"
- "You aren't open to new ideas"
- "You didn't even listen to my idea"
- "People just don't want to be around you"

*You are a person worth knowing, work on sending signals that say so.*

## **Consistent and Congruent**

Despite popular mythology to the contrary, most research indicates that body language is always part of a larger context and not dependent on a single gesture. Our audience, anyone listening to and observing us, is subconsciously evaluating all that we say and do. They form an initial impression of us, usually in just a few seconds and then their confirmation bias will seek to align everything else they perceive with that initial impression. Inconsistencies quickly translate to an unconscious perception of insincerity or outright misrepresentation.

When we work with people on how to interpret other peoples' body language **one of the common mistakes is to attach meaning to a single gesture or pose.** All non-verbal communication is part of a context. To be effective it must be consistent and congruent.

Our body language is **consistent** when it is communicating the same thing our words are communicating. When body language is inconsistent, the listener will perceive the non-verbal message as the real thing. Thus, no one will believe we are listening if our legs are crossed and we are looking at our phone even if I say “I am listening.” In fact, it will come across as disingenuous.

Subconsciously **we perceive inconsistencies in body language as the #1 indication of lying**. If our body language does not match our words, the listener will unconsciously react as if they have just heard a lie.

In addition, our body language must be **congruent** with the social context. If I am a junior technical representative in a high-level executive meeting yet am using power poses and taking up a lot of space, my actions will be incongruent. All those in the room will perceive that I am not aligned with the social context and this will generally negate any effort I make to communicate.

*Publicly challenging a closed-minded superior is a common form of incongruence.*

### **Start with these three**

There is a quick way to totally jump-start your presence that is not complete but will certainly signal that you are taking a new approach. First things to do are:

1. **Intentionally manage your face**, it is your primary voice
2. **Smile**, it is the universal positive
3. **Mirror their posture**, it is amazingly effective at building rapport

The first two steps are fairly obvious and we will go over some of the things you can do with your face later. While we are on quick steps let's run through a laundry list of positive non-verbals we can be personally auditing in ourselves:

#### Good

- Smile
- Maintain eye contact
- Uncrossed arms
- Lean slightly towards the person you are talking to
- Enthusiastic tone of voice

Mirroring is less commonly understood but is one of our most powerful non-verbal tools.

### **Mirroring**

On the surface, it sounds absurd but research clearly shows mirroring to be the easiest form of non-verbal communication to implement and manage because it is automatically adapted to the situation. Yes, you need to be somewhat subtle with it or it comes

across as creepy. The key is to mirror the listener's posture not their gestures. If they are leaning forward, so are you. If they are relaxed and back in their chair, so are you. If they smile, you return the favor.

There is an interesting two-way dynamic with mirroring. It is a natural instinct so people will mirror you as you talk. If you smile and give other physical cues that you are passionate about your topic, they will mirror those cues and, in a second odd human aspect, actually start to experience those emotions. This is why we say such things as laughter, yawning, passion and excitement are contagious.

*"If you want people to like you and believe in you, smile at them during a conversation, and they will unconsciously return the favor and feel good as a result."*

*- Dr. Travis Bradbury, LinkedIn Blog -*

Mirroring must, like all non-verbal communication, be consistent and congruent. It is especially important that you not mirror power poses unless you specifically wish to challenge the person you are with.

*Warning: do not mirror your boss's power pose unless you are specifically challenging them. They will perceive this as arrogance.*

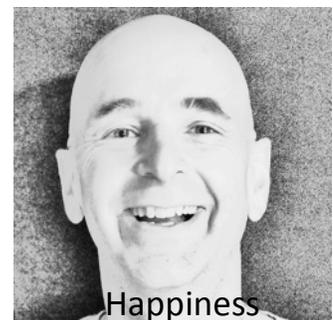
Mirroring goes beyond body language and should include tone, speed, and voice inflection. Matching another person's emotion validates that emotion. This is pleasing. It is why saying "calm down" to a person who is upset generally does not work. You have non-verbally communicated that their emotion is not valid and they should choose another. You will be much more effective by matching their emotion, "yes, that is really irritating when a car cuts you off like that!" then intentionally transition to a calmer and happier emotion. They will unconsciously mirror you and you will get the calming effect you were aiming for.

### **Understanding and Managing your Face**

There are seven micro expressions that we form with our faces to express emotion. These are the foundation for our repertoire of facial expressions. These expressions can last as little as 1/25th of a second and are sometimes hard to control. They are the tells people use to see our real emotions and whether or not we are telling the truth.

Micro expressions add to what someone perceives from your posture. Let's start with two emotions that **build relationships through empathy**; happiness and sadness:

#1 Happiness - We all know this one, a genuine smile that shows in our eyes. The little wrinkles, crows feet, that come off our eyes are the sign for genuine happiness. Fake smiles don't involve the eyes.



**#2 Sadness** - Sadness is a very genuine emotion. It is almost impossible to fake. Corners of your mouth are down and inner corners of eyebrows are down. It is a primary way of conveying empathy but since it is hard to fake, it can also backfire if done poorly.

These next two emotions can be useful or dangerous depending on the situation and your intentions.

**#3 Anger** - Indicated by eyebrows down and mouth tight. Sometimes the chin is jutting out as a stronger demonstration of anger. Showing anger is useful to make a point or for empathy but is a frequent problem signal to send in meetings where your role is to buy into something. Know anger and use it intentionally.

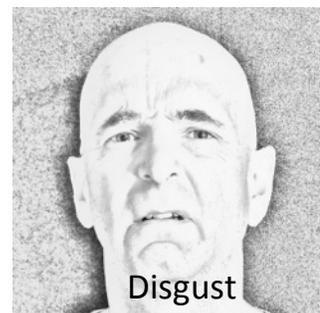
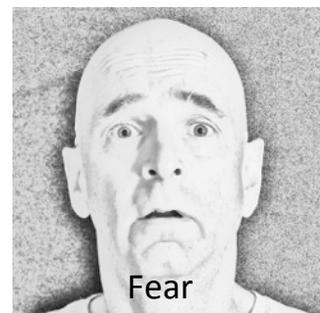
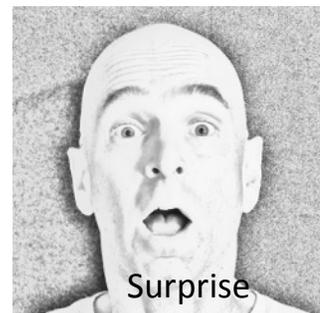
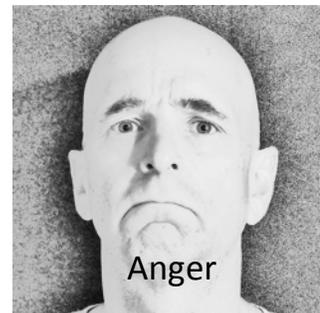
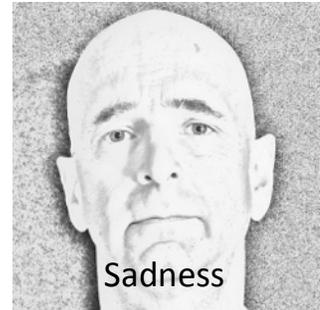
**#4 Surprise** - Eyebrows are up and very rounded. Mouth is loose, drops and is frequently open and round. Surprise can be a very positive emotion when someone has accomplished something or presented an idea that is truly great.

Most photos used to illustrate facial expressions have to exaggerate them in order to show clearly what is happening. People are actually keying in on very subtle facial motions to read your micro expressions and emotions. When you practice, which you should, practice being aware of what both strong and subtle executions of each micro expression feels like.

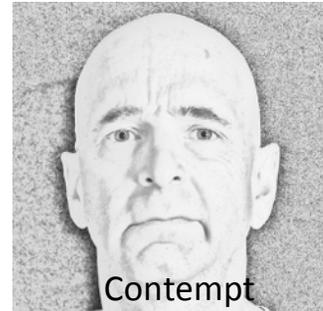
Finally, these last three emotions are almost always damaging to a relationship. You should know them well and avoid them.

**#5 Fear** - Indicated by eyebrows raising yet staying mostly flat. Eyes are very open with the whites showing. Mouth will start to open but is tight. Showing a fear micro expression will generally be perceived as one of two things in a business environment. In some cases it will appear as if you are weak, unfit for the situation at hand. In other cases it will be perceived that you think you have been caught at something, something you wish to hide is being revealed.

**#6 Disgust** - This is the face everyone makes when they smell something awful. Try it. In a meeting it says, "I am not receiving your idea well."



**#7 Contempt** - Contempt is subtle, shown by raising one side of our mouth. It is a key indicator of a poor relationship and is the opposite of empathy. Know and manage this micro expression.



The majority of studies indicate these seven micro expressions are universal and transcend cultures. They are key tools for social awareness in Emotional Intelligence. People control their facial micro expressions by suppressing them as they feel them. This gives you time, depending on how good the person is at self-managing, to read their emotions. You can then modify your message to exactly address the emotions they are having.

*Everyone exhibits micro expressions of their emotions. Some people suppress them. Some quickly, others less so but they are always a clue to how you are being received.*

### **Head Tilt**

Head tilt is a sort of macro expression that you can overlay on any micro expression.

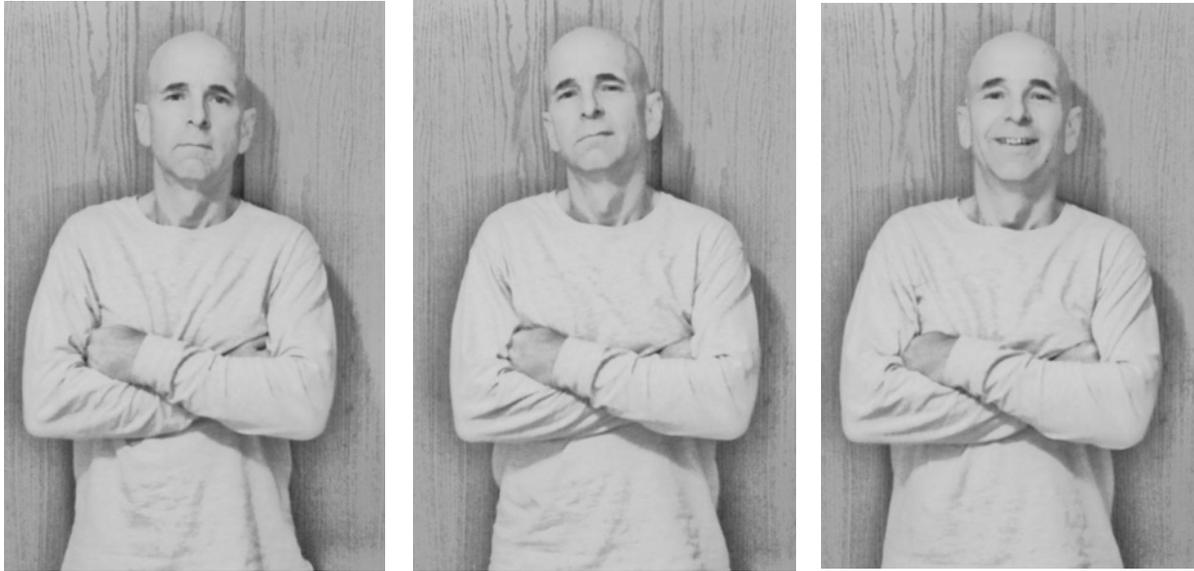
- Tilting your head back communicates distance and usually arrogance
- Tilting forward is a friendly, open expression.
- Tilting to one side or the other is a non-threatening gesture

Head tilt is especially obvious in meetings and a frequent cause of unintentional signals.

### **Standing Signals – How open are you?**

As people are able to take in more of your body and arms, there are more signals and more possibilities. Let's look at four that are especially applicable to a technical professional environment:

**Blocking** – Blocking is when you subconsciously use your arms to protect yourself. Most commonly this involves folding your arms, a ubiquitous body language signal which many people try to explain away. Folding arms is virtually always a signal that you feel threatened or are closed to what is being presented. You subconsciously fold your arms to close and protect yourself. Rationalizing that you are cold or just feel relaxed with your arms folded only deludes yourself and sends a signal you don't want to send.



Folding your arms is a common form of blocking. Notice how micro expressions modify the body language with disinterest, contempt, and happiness. Does the smile send a good signal or an inconsistent signal?

We are going to take a quick aside before we look at the power poses in body language.

### **Take the Lead**

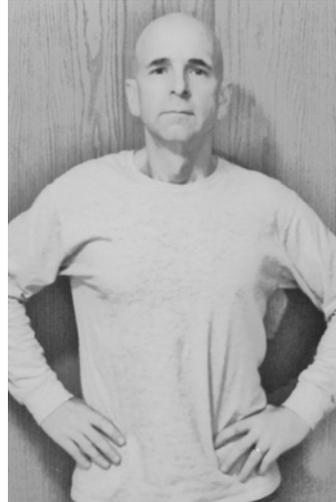
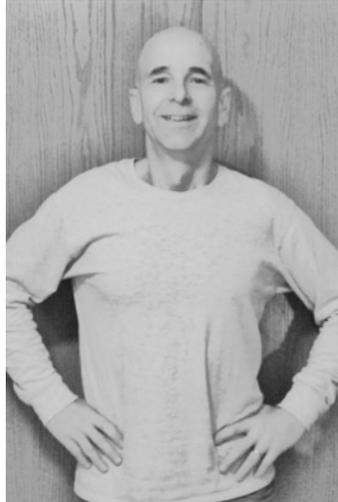
*Congruence – in agreement or harmony*

Congruence is the key aspect of non-verbal communication where we must communicate in a way that is congruent with the situation and our role. There are times where you will take a leadership role. For most technical professionals this is temporary such as giving a presentation or simply speaking up and asking a question. To be congruent, your body language must transform from following to leading and then back to following again when you are done. Body language cues to power include:

1. Erect posture
2. Command of physical space
3. Purposeful stride

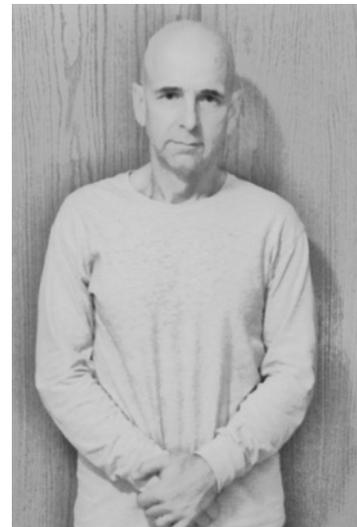
In the business world it is important to understand that, whether openly acknowledged or not, there are power relationships, pecking orders and impressions are formed based on how we fit into and communicate our place within that. A key rule to remember is...

*If you fail to show signs of respect to someone in authority it will be read, by them, as a challenge to their authority.*

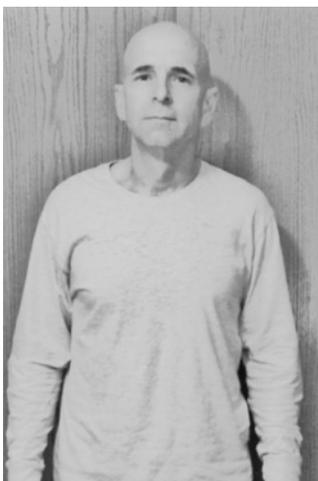


Power – The opposite of the submissive message, power poses say “ I see myself as either the leader or I am challenging the leader in this setting.” It is a tool to be used appropriately but pay heed to the previous discussion.

When you are in power you take up space. You are so big you might not even fit in the whole photo. Micro expressions can modify your power posture and are especially critical when you are the formal leader in conveying complementary messages such as “I’m charge and I care.”



Protect – This is the classic signal of deference. You are clearly signaling that you see yourself as the lowest status person in the room. There is a time to use this, but not if you are looking for influence.



Open – This is the magic signal you are usually looking to present. In many ways it is an absence of other, mitigating signals with an expression on your face that says, “I’m listening”.

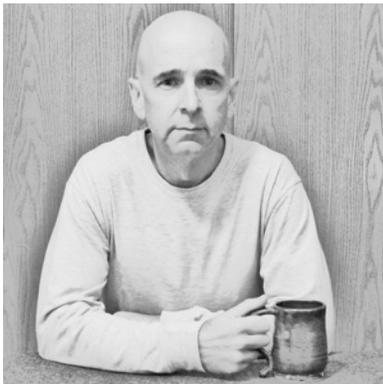
## Communicating at the Table

In some ways sitting is a special case of body language. But meetings are the norm in most settings so these are some of your most critical non-verbal communications.

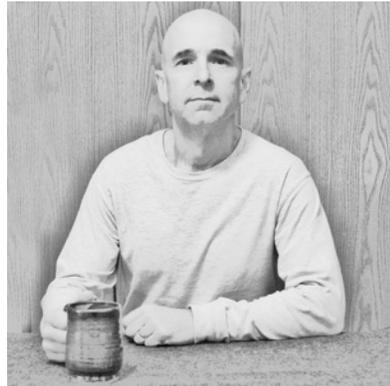
A critical point to remember in meetings is that it does not matter how big the meeting is, people are tuning into the signals you send and you must manage them.

***Large meetings are where people who think they are invisible are critically judged due to the signals they send with body language and facial expression***

Blocking – Like when you stand, you are going to have to avoid sending a signal that you are closed to what is being said. Folded arms are similar to standing but an additional posture to be cautious of is one arm across you on the table. Open that arm out to say you are open to what is being said. Then add a micro expression that says, “I’m listening.”



Blocked



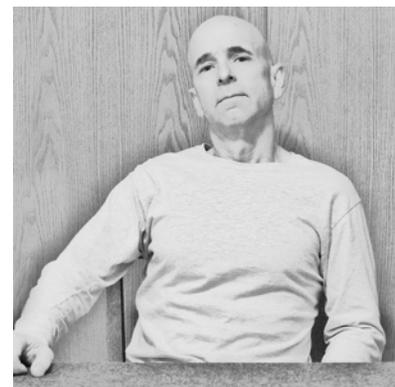
Unblocked



Unblocked and Listening

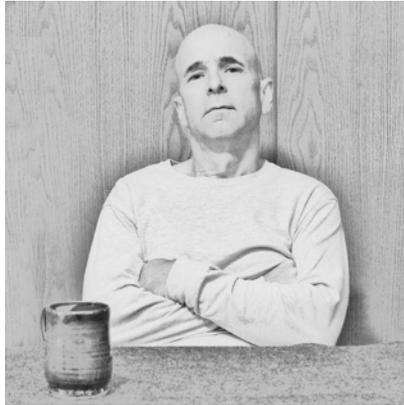
Power – Power is expressed at tables in the same way standing or sitting, you take up space. Arms out, lean back, own the room. Just be prepared to be challenged, resented, or slapped down if you are not the leader.

Inappropriate power positions are a common reason professionals are verbally attacked at meetings. They have challenged the leader who is now reestablishing their authority.

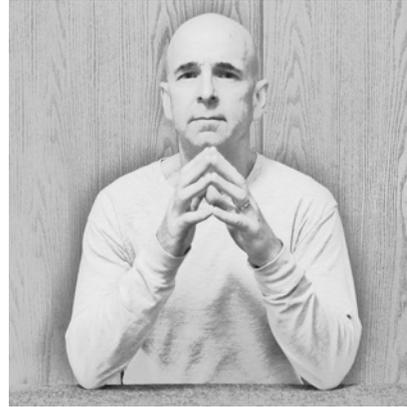


Am I really in charge?

Disinterest and Confidence – We finish with two combinations of posture and micro expression. One says, “I’m disinterested and a bit contemptuous of this whole thing” the other says, “I’m listening and confident I can solve this problem.”



Disinterest



Interested

*Signals of disinterest are the number one reason technical professionals are not given influence in an organization.*

People usually can't explain why but they just don't see the person as part of the solution. Looking interested, engaged, and listening in meetings is a key step in influential maturity.

### **Key Body Language Onstage**

Although body language in front of a crowd is a large topic, *The Silent Language of Leaders* gives some great advice for managing your body language while formally presenting, consider these eight tips:

1. Manage your stress level
2. Focus on your message – emotionally involve your audience
3. Make a confident entrance
4. Maintain eye contact
5. Step out from behind the lectern
6. Talk with your hands and remember open, hands more up is a sign of integrity.
7. Move – people are drawn to movement and you want your audience drawn to you. Move around, be dynamic and alive.
8. Monitor your audience – look for signs that you are either engaging them, such as eye contact and short, single nods, or losing them such as texting, reading or looking down. Don't be afraid to change your tempo, move around or take other measures to re-engage them.

*It is better to stop early than to drone on to a disengaged audience.*

## **Know when to play the game**

In most work environments inhabited by technical professionals it is not going to be critical to manage your body language 100% of the time. It is probably understood that you might slouch, cringe, or curl up in a ball while attempting to solve a tough technical problem. In these four situations, though, you need to be game-on:

1. In meetings
2. While presenting
3. While listening, especially one on one
4. In social situations primarily with those outside your normal social circle

If you would like to dive into this more, we highly recommend Carol Kinsey Goman's book [The Silent Language of Leaders](#). There are also some excellent courses dedicated to body language such as those by Vanessa Van Edwards (see [scienceofpeople.com](http://scienceofpeople.com))

## References

Goman, Carol Kinsey, [The Silent Language of Leaders](#), Jossey-Bass, 2011

Pease, Allan and Barbara, [The Definitive Book of Body Language](#), Bantam, 2004

Van Edwards, Vanessa, [Secrets of Body Language](#), ScienceofPeople.com, 2016

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