12 Body Language Tips For Career Success

When properly used, body language can be your key to greater success. It can help you develop positive business relationships, influence and motivate the people who report to you, improve productivity, bond with members of your team, and present your ideas with more impact. Here are a dozen tips for using body language to project confidence, credibility, and your personal brand of charisma:

1. **Stand tall and take up space.**
   Power, status, and confidence are nonverbally displayed through the use of height and space. Keeping your posture erect, your shoulders back, and your head held high makes you look sure of yourself.

   If you stand you will look more powerful and assured to those who are seated. If you move around, the additional space you take up adds to that impression. If you are sitting, you can look more confident by putting both feet flat on the floor, widening your arms away from your body (or hooking one elbow on the back of your chair), and spreading out your belongings on the conference table to claim more territory.

2. **Widen your stance.**
   When you stand with your feet close together, you can seem hesitant or unsure of what you are saying. But when you widen your stance, relax your knees and center your weight in your lower body, you look more “solid” and confident.

3. **Lower your vocal pitch.**
   In the workplace, the quality of your voice can be a deciding factor in how you are perceived. Speakers with higher-pitched voices are judged to be less empathic, less powerful and more nervous than speakers with lower pitched voices. One easy technique I learned from a speech therapist was to put your lips together and say “Um hum, um hum, um hum.” Doing so relaxes your voice into its optimal pitch. This is especially helpful before you get on an important phone call – where the sound of your voice is so critical.

4. **Try Power Priming.**
   To display confidence and be perceived as upbeat and positive, think of a past success that fills you with pride and confidence. (This doesn't have to be taken from your professional life – although I do encourage clients to keep a “success log” so that they can easily find an event.) Then recall the feeling of power and certainty – and remember or imagine how you looked and sounded. Recalling that genuine emotion will help you embody it as you enter the meeting room or walk up to the podium.
5. Strike a Power Pose.
Research into the effects of body posture on confidence, conducted at Harvard and Columbia
Business Schools, has shown that simply holding your body in expansive, “high-power” poses
(leaning back with hands behind the head and feet up on a desk, or standing with legs and arms
stretched wide open) for as little as two minutes stimulates higher levels of testosterone — the
hormone linked to power and dominance — and lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.

Try this before your next important business meeting, and I guarantee you will look and feel
more confident and certain. In addition to causing hormonal shifts in both males and females,
these poses lead to increased feelings of power and a higher tolerance for risk. The study also
corroborated my observation that people are more often influenced by how they feel about
you than by what you’re saying.

6. Maintain positive eye contact.
You may be an introvert, you may be shy, or your cultural background may have taught you
that extended eye contact with a superior is not appropriate, but businesspeople from the U.S.,
Europe, Australia (and many other parts of the world) will expect you to maintain eye contact
50-60% of the time.

Here’s a simple technique to improve eye contact: Whenever you greet a business colleague,
look into his or her eyes long enough to notice what color they are.

7. Talk with your hands.
Brain imaging has shown that a region called Broca’s area, which is important for speech
production, is active not only when we’re talking, but also when we wave our hands. Since
gesture is integrally linked to speech, gesturing as you talk can actually power up your thinking.
Whenever I encourage clients to incorporate gestures into their deliveries, I find that their
verbal content improves, their speech is less hesitant, and their use of fillers (“ums” and “uhhs”) decreases. Experiment with this and you’ll find that the physical act of gesturing helps you
form clearer thoughts and speak in tighter sentences with more declarative language.

8. Use open gestures.
Keeping your movements relaxed, using open arm gestures, and showing the palms of your
hands — the ultimate “see, I have nothing to hide” gesture — are silent signals of credibility
and candor. Individuals with open gestures are perceived more positively and are more
persuasive than those with closed gestures (arms crossed, hands hidden or held close to the
body, etc.). Also, if you hold your arms at waist level, and gesture within that plane, most
audiences will perceive you as assured and credible.

9. Try a steeple.
You see lecturers, politicians and executives use this hand gesture when they are quite certain
about a point they are making. This power signal is where your hands make a “steeple” —
where the tips of your fingers touch, but the palms are separated. When you want to project
conviction and sincerity about a point you’re making, try steepling.
10. Reduce nervous gestures.
When we’re nervous or stressed, we all pacify with some form of self-touching, nonverbal behavior: We rub our hands together, bounce our feet, drum our fingers on the desk, play with our jewelry, twirl our hair, fidget. When we do any of these things, we immediately rob our statements of credibility. If you catch yourself indulging in any of these behaviors, take a deep breath and steady yourself by placing your feet firmly on the floor and your hands palm down in your lap, on the desk or on the conference table. Stillness sends a message that you’re calm and confident.

11. Smile.
Smiles have a powerful effect on us. The human brain prefers happy faces, and we can spot a smile at 300 feet – the length of a football field. Smiling not only stimulates your own sense of well being it also tells those around you that you are approachable and trustworthy.

Research from Duke University proves that we like and remember those who smile at us – and shows why we find them more memorable. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), the Duke researchers found that the orbitofrontal cortices (a “reward center” in the brain) were more active when subjects were learning and recalling the names of smiling individuals. Most importantly, smiling directly influences how other people respond to you. When you smile at someone, they almost always smile in return. And, because facial expressions trigger corresponding feelings, the smile you get back actually changes that person’s emotional state in a positive way.

12. Perfect your handshake.
Since touch is the most powerful and primitive nonverbal cue, it’s worth devoting time to cultivating a great handshake. The right handshake can give you instant credibility and the wrong one can cost you the job or the contract. So, no “dead fish” or “bone-crusher” grips, please. The first makes you appear to be a wimp and the second signals that you are a bully. Handshake behavior has cultural variations, but the ideal handshake in North America means facing the other person squarely, making firm palm to palm contact with the web of your hand (the skin between the thumb and first finger) touching the web of the other person’s hand, and matching hand pressure as closely as possible without compromising your own idea of a proper professional grip.

By the way -- while a great handshake is important for all professionals, it is especially key for women whose confidence is evaluated by the quality of their handshake even more than it is with their male counterparts.

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