

# **Article for Module 7**

## **The Power of Mindful Non-verbal Communication**

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# The Power of Mindful Non-verbal Communication

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If you were an electrician or a carpenter, you would have a toolbox full of the tools you need to do your job. You might have a favorite tool, but that would not stop you from making use of the full array of your other tools.

When it comes to communication, we often tend to rely on language at the expense of the rest of our communication toolbox. Language is one of the main traits that sets human beings apart. Yet, we communicate with one another in other ways as well such as tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, and posture.

Evolved leaders are not only aware of these other means of communication but also they use nonverbal tools mindfully and deliberately to reinforce their message. This lifts the value of your communication and your value as a leader.

If our nonverbal communication is not aligned with our spoken words, then our message will be mixed or muddled, and it will not resonate at all. Our message will be lost in translation.

What we are missing out on in such cases, says author Nick Morgan, is a kind of “second conversation,” one governed at both ends in a way that is largely unconscious. This makes sense when you consider that our unconscious minds can process as many as 11 million bits of information per second, while our conscious minds are limited to 40 bits. Understandably, we instinctively delegate a great deal of information-processing to our unconscious.

How can we take ownership over a process that seems to occur beneath the surface of our awareness? In his book *Power Cues*, Morgan argues that with practice we can move some of that second conversation out of the dark and into the light.

We must first become aware of how we inhabit space and how we show up, especially at the most critical times. At a client meeting, do we slouch or look down at our laptop? During a presentation, do we stand with our hands behind our back or crossed in front?

This second unconscious conversation does more than merely reinforce our conscious conversation. Sometimes, it is the conversation --the arena where hearts and minds are won or lost. For example, Researchers at MIT have found that the success of a venture capital pitch can be accurately predicted by tracking nonverbal signaling.

Once we become more aware of our characteristic gestures and body language, Morgan says, we can then go about aligning our nonverbal signaling with our spoken message. This starts with clarity of intent.

We think we know exactly what we want from a given meeting or presentation. In reality, however, our minds are often a jumble of emotions and random thoughts. If we take the time to hone in on the essence of our intention, then it is more likely to play itself out through our gestures, intonation, and facial expression. For example, going into a meeting with top-level managers to explain a corporate restructuring, you might sum up your intent in a single word, such as reassurance.

This inside-out approach proceeds from emotion to gesture. Gesture sometimes anticipates and even shapes emotion and thought. We can choose to begin there and work outside-in. With practice, we can learn to be more conscious of certain gestures and nonverbal cues and, therefore, their effect on others and ourselves.

## **MINDFUL PRESENCE**

All of this comes down to awareness of self, of others, and of a situation, which is mindfulness.

In my coaching practice, I impress upon clients the far-reaching ripple effects of a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is often marketed as a stress-reduction technique. While it certainly does help alleviate stress, it is so much more. The awareness and clarity generated by a meditation session will over time translate into the rest of your day.

Mindfulness works hand-in-hand with mind-body unity. Mind-body practices, such as yoga or tai chi, are essentially mindfulness in motion. Those practices teach that when the body leads, then the mind will follow.

Psychologist Amy Cuddy discovered a version of this truth in her explorations of what she calls presence. In research first conducted at Harvard, Cuddy found that people who feel confident and powerful are likely to manifest that presence in a more expansive posture. She wondered if the reverse might hold true. Could an expansive posture actually make someone feel more confident and powerful?

The answer was yes. Despite a backlash against the popularity of the “power pose” and some criticism of her research, Cuddy recently reaffirmed those findings in a new academic paper published in *Psychological Science*. The mind does indeed follow the body’s lead.

Implied in this research is an essential insight that body language not only communicates messages to others but also to ourselves as well. The entire array of

nonverbal signals at our disposal announces to the world, and to ourselves, who we are. As the poet, Walt Whitman wrote, “We are convinced by our presence.”

## **AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT**

It can be tempting to view the mysteries of nonverbal communication with anxiety or as a potential minefield. What if I give a great pitch but only to undercut it with the wrong body language?

We can instead approach this rich, layered world as an opportunity to connect with ourselves and with others more fully. Learning to understand and use everything in your communication toolbox will make you a better leader and a better human being.

We lose out on this opportunity when we rely excessively on texts and emails. We limit our toolbox, risk miscommunication and miss out on the many other benefits of face-to-face interaction, such as building trust and shared purpose.

Nonverbal communication does not need to be a minefield, but rather it can be a gold mine. Be mindful of it and embrace it. You will see your presence and influence grow.

