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Monday, July 12, 2004

Body language can send crucial, lasting signals about you

By ANALISA NAZARENO
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

So, there is a secret handshake.

And the secret is actually well-known among communications experts who study body language and non-verbal communication.

In business settings, the handshake that connotes confidence, sincerity and openness goes like this: right hand extended and vertical, a firm but not a crushing grip, and in Texas, three or four full pumps up and down. On the East Coast, it's three to five shorter, quicker pumps. And in California, it's one or two quick pumps -- anything more than that is just too much.

So says communications specialist Patti Wood, who trains businessmen and public speakers on improving their presentation skills, and who frequently interprets the body language of the rich and powerful for the media.

"It's not the firmness so much as the fact that the palm of your hand has full contact with the palm of the other person's hand," Wood says.

She argues that it takes 90 seconds for someone to formulate an opinion about another person based on first impressions.

In business, whether it's making a sales pitch, building clientele or creating rapport with co-workers, bosses or employees, those first 90 seconds are crucial and hard to erase. Elissa Foster, communications professor at the University of Texas-San Antonio, agrees.

"It's hard to swallow that 95 percent of what we understand of a person or a message is communicated non-verbally," Foster said.

"But when you think about what is being communicated with the tone of the voice, clarity and color of the tone, the pausing and pitch, and the

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articulation, all of those come through the voice. And just like with the body, the tone of the voice can be difficult to control unconsciously, which is why we pay attention to those things."

In other words, you can script what you say, but it's harder to control how you say it.

If someone is saying they are trustworthy, but they're not looking you in the eye, or they're making a strange face, you become suspicious.

The formal study of body language and non-verbal communication began in earnest during the 1950s, with the publication of "Introduction to Kinesics," written by Ray Birdwhistell.

Since then, several have been written about hand movements, intercultural non-verbal communication, and something called "paralinguistics," or the study of the voice.

Perhaps the most accessible of texts includes the recently published "Field Guide to Gestures: How to Identify and Interpret Every Gesture Known to Man," by Nancy Armstrong and Melissa Wagner.

Like apes and bears, the powerful and those aspiring for power try to dominate a social interaction by taking up as much space as possible, broadening their shoulders, standing with their feet apart or sitting with their legs spread out.

When shaking hands, some try to dominate that interaction by forcing his or her hand on top in a horizontal position, rather than a vertical, equal position. Others try to dominate by squeezing harder than necessary.

"You can never take one gesture or one eye movement or posture and say this means that," Foster said. "One of the things with non-verbal communication is that it is notoriously ambiguous. If people try to read other people and assume that they know because they've done a one-to-one translation, you're on the wrong track. Non-verbal communication can mean a lot of different things."

Nevertheless, people often make quick assumptions because of how they've interpreted non-verbal cues. And in important situations, such as job interviews, people rely heavily on their interpretations of body language.



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"Most hiring decisions are made within the first 10 seconds of a meeting, before you even sit and talk," Wood said.

"No matter what a person says after those 10 seconds, the interviewer spends their time saying to themselves, 'I was right,' looking for information to confirm their first impression."

Wood advises job candidates to smile sincerely as they give a firm and formal equal-power handshake, both at the beginning and the closing of an interview.

"Because even if you don't think you did well, you want to face that person, smile and give them a good handshake," she said. "You can save a bad interview with a good handshake."

Once on the job, workers join an increasingly diverse workplace with plenty of room for misinterpretation of non-verbal cues.

A hand on another person's shoulder can be read as a fatherly gesture, a patronizing move or a sexual advance. A failure to look a person in the eye can be viewed as a cue to deception, when for others it could be a sign of respect or timidity.

When you're not sure about what a touch or a look means, Foster and Wood both say the best course of action is to talk about it.

"You can do a perception check and say, 'Well, every time you come to my desk, you lay your hand on my shoulder. Are you trying to be reassuring, or are you trying to say something else?'" Foster said.

"Explicit communication, being explicit is the best thing to do, but it can be tough."

Wood said in tricky male-female workplace interactions, women will tend to give off non-verbal cues if they're uncomfortable with a set of sexual jokes or a way of touching. Men, she said, will typically not pick up on those cues.

Most of the time, Wood said, when women tell men to stop telling jokes or to stop touching, they stop.

"Women will say, 'He should have known I was upset because I was letting him know with my body language,' but people don't necessarily read that non-verbal language," Wood said. "Since some people don't read that non-verbal language, you have to be the one to talk about it."

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