

# To Make an Impact, Improve Your Non-Verbal Awareness

Your voice and body language can turn people off or on.  
To gain more support, turn these basics to best advantage.

*By Bob Phibbs*

**T**he more you understand what your body and voice tell others – often without your knowledge – the clearer you’ll realize the need to pay attention to those oft-neglected elements of communication. Unless you focus on them, they can get in the way of your message.

That’s especially true when you’re trying to convince people to donate money or support you in other ways. In such situations, your body and voice often communicate fear – and fear makes people look away. Fear can silence your own voice when it needs to be heard.

People can sense bad vibrations even when your words are positive. Indeed, much of your communication has nothing to do with the words you use. (Some researchers say that your actual words make up only 7% of communication; 55% is your body language, and 38% is your tone of voice.)

When you communicate virtually, as by videoconference or phone, you may be tempted to forget about your body language. But in virtual situations, when people have fewer clues to rely on, they’ll scrutinize you even more closely than in person.

During video meetings, for example, people may study your reactions when others are speaking, so you don’t want to be caught yawning, checking texts on your phone, or looking disinterested or distracted in any way. (See “Zoom Exhaustion Is Real: How to Find Balance & Stay Connected” on page 31 and “Connecting through the Camera & Keyboard” on page 16 to create positive virtual experiences.)

“Your body and voice tell people much more than your words do.”

## What’s the Energy Around You?

Think about a time you felt devalued by someone. Picture their voice and body language as they belittled you. Imagine you’re looking at that person right now as they yell insults at you. Now let your body react as you did then.

What was your body’s reaction? I’ll bet you cringed, averted your eyes, and slumped your shoulders. You might have turned away or even stepped back.

Now think what it would feel like to be asked for support by someone whose shoulders were slumped, who didn’t meet your eyes, whose arms were crossed. Would you feel engaged by them? Of course not!

Their body was telling you they weren’t being authentic. Their non-verbal cues made it hard for you to trust them.

Most people don’t realize how much they communicate through their voices and bodies, so the first thing to do is simply take notice. Do you cross your arms unconsciously? Do your shoulders slouch most of the time? Is your voice small and timid or overly loud and aggressive? Do you avoid looking into people’s eyes, or do you look at them with a defiant glare?

Those unconscious habits won’t bring supporters to you. In fact, those behaviors are communicating your unease.

## Understand These Wordless Cues

Even when talking on the phone, when people can’t see you, your posture affects how you feel and how your energy comes across. Whenever you talk to someone, try the following pointers to be sure you’re sending the right message:

**1. Lift your sternum** (that’s the flat bone at the front center of your chest). This allows more oxygen into the lungs. A good image to maintain is that of a string pulling your posture up from your sternum. This allows your shoulders to become more relaxed and your voice more confident when engaging people.

## “Nonverbal clues are what make people trust you – or not.”

**2. Lean forward** (but just a bit). Yes it's subtle, but it keeps you from leaning backward, which shows a negative attitude.

**3. Smile.** A smile is your best tool to gain support. When you don't smile, it's the quickest way to turn someone off. And you may be surprised to learn that people can "hear" your smile (or your frown) over the phone. Your voice will be brighter, more enthusiastic, and more persuasive when you're smiling.

**4. Meet their eyes.** We like people who look at us. Too much eye contact and it can feel threatening, but too little and you come off insincere. Yes, this is a balancing act to practice.

**5. Gesture.** Use an open hand or two fingers together as you gesture. It's perceived as more open and friendly than a closed hand.

**6. Open your arms** to show a welcoming attitude. Arms folded over your chest indicate you're unsympathetic, authoritative, and at some level, closing yourself off from the other person.

**7. Watch their body language.** An old-school tip says to mirror the other person's body language. For example, if they use their hands a lot, you do the same. If their arms are open, so are yours. To a certain extent, that's true. But if the person suddenly crosses their arms, you don't want to mirror that. Their body is telling you they're closed off. You need to maintain an open stance and find out what you said or did to displease the other person. Addressing it with something like, "Did I just say something to put you off?" is a good way to bring them back.

**8. Modulate your voice.** You communicate warmth, worry, indifference, frustration, empathy, or whatever emotions you're feeling with the tone of your voice and the pace, pitch, and volume of your speech.

Make sure you emphasize important words, let your voice rise and fall, and change your pitch back and forth from high to low rather than speaking in a monotone. A dull, spiritless voice makes people disconnect from your words.

Don't rush through what you have to say. Speak at a relaxed, easy pace, but keep energy and interest in your voice. Insert pauses between sentences, but don't hesitate too long, either.

Change the volume of your speech, too – talking more loudly to nail down a point and then more softly. Keep in mind that a loud voice isn't always the best way to gain attention. If you speak softly most of the time, you'll be more compelling when you amplify your voice now and then to underscore a point.

In short, find a balance in your tone, pitch, volume, inflection, and pace. Vary them to keep people's interest.

Take care not to let your voice get higher at the end of a sentence so that it sounds more like a question than a statement. Doing so suggests indecision, lack of confidence, and even incompetence. (It's a common habit, especially in young people these days, but it's worthwhile to break this habit as quickly as possible.)

Remember that your posture, breathing, and overall body language have a great impact, whether you're in sight of your listeners or not. For a more commanding voice, stand or sit up straight, and keep your shoulders and chest as still as possible. Each time you start a new sentence or thought, inhale silently and quickly, then exhale slowly just before you speak.

## Choose Your Demeanor

Examine your own behavior. In what situations do you lose your voice? At that moment, what does your body look like? When you're about to ask someone for their support, how is your body positioned? When do you notice your breath becoming shallow? When do you lean away from someone?

The more you can *choose* your body posture and voice, the more you'll find you can also choose your attitude. You might still be afraid at some level when asking for support. But when you use the tips in this article, you'll act as if you aren't afraid. That will let you place the fog of fear in the background. Then, the easier it will be to get your message across. 

---

*Bob Phibbs is the CEO of The Retail Doctor (RetailDoc.com), a New York consultancy. As a speaker since 1994, his presentations are designed to provide practical information in a fun and memorable format.*

## Refine Your Communication Skills

Assure you're getting your message across with articles such as these at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Fear of Feelings: Dealing with Emotions in Public Speaking** (Vol. 17, No. 2)

**How to Fix Communication Breakdowns** (Vol. 29, No. 1)

**Avoid the L Word** (Vol. 37, No. 2)

**Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)

**Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)

**Powerful New Communication Tool for Your Meetings: Engaging Both Sides of Your Brain** (Vol. 26, No. 3)

**We Are Made for Story** (Vol. 37, No. 4)

**How Jargon Undermines Communication** (Vol. 27, No. 2)