

The 2 Body Language Mistakes You Make Every Day

By Nick Morgan

We normally don't think at all – at least, in the casual sense of the word “think” – about where we are in space, or how we're gesturing, or what kind of impression we're making on the people around us. Most of that activity is left to our unconscious minds most of the time. So when we do think consciously about such things, it's very distracting. Precisely because these chores are normally left to our unconscious minds, when we make them conscious they tend to drive out other thoughts.

In fact, it's virtually impossible to monitor where you are in space, keep track of all your hand gestures, focus on the people around you, and keep up a steady flow of witty and to-the-point conversation all at the same time. We may think consciously about body language on rare occasions, noticing when someone touches us, or suddenly moves very close to us, but that kind of awareness is intermittent and brief and created by unusual body language, rather than the ordinary stuff. Constant self-monitoring is simply too difficult for most of us to manage. As the neuroscientists say, it takes too much cognitive load.

But is it necessary? Why can't we leave that monitoring to the unconscious where it's used to residing? Unfortunately, the answer is that we do have to develop some way of consciously creating the right kinds of body language in ourselves, especially in moments of great importance, because leaving it to chance won't work. We're far too likely to make two critical mistakes if we leave things to the gods.

This Is Your First Mistake

First mistake? We'll project our nervousness, and fail to command at the important moments of opportunity. Say you're heading into a key meeting, one on one, with your boss. The topic is your salary, and particularly whether or not it should be raised. And let's say, not to beat around the financial bush, you need the money. You've moved to a new town in taking the new job, and the expenses of the new burg are proving to be higher than you thought.

There's a lot riding on the meeting, in short, and so you're nervous. If you just leave your body language to chance, then you're going to convey your nervousness to your boss. And unless she's completely clueless and lacking in negotiation skills, she'll register that nervousness, read it as weakness, or perhaps that you don't think you deserve the raise, and act accordingly. You'll be far less likely to get the money you were hoping for.

The second mistake you're likely to make, if you leave your body language to chance, is that you'll just convey a typical person's typically distracted state of mind. When you let your mind wander on an ordinary day, you might think about your to-do list, picking up milk on the way home, that TV show you saw last night, how sleepy you are, how you're not making any progress on your New Year's resolution to lose 15 pounds, how annoying your office-mate's voice is – all in the space of a few seconds.

If you walk into your boss's office thinking about all of that, your body language will reflect that mental list, and it will be as diffuse as your mind. You will neither be charismatic, nor powerful, nor focused. Once again, your chances of getting the raise will be small to nil.

But if it's too hard to monitor body language consciously, and it doesn't work to let nature take its course, what's left? How do we solve this critical problem?

We need to find another way. It begins with emotional focus.