

When persuading, body language beats words

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In any law firm, there is a lot of persuasion going on. Persuasion and negotiation are, after all, essential skills in the practice of law. But they are also important in other tasks performed at law firms. In the human resources area, you must persuade someone to hire you, pay you more money and advance you in your career. In the operations area, you must persuade your colleagues to work with you.

And of course, a lot of law firm persuasion takes place in the realm of business development. You must persuade clients in your marketplace that you are expert in your field of practice. You must persuade influencers to refer to you to others and potential clients to meet with you. You must persuade current clients to stay with you and give you more work.

Wouldn't it be much easier to persuade others if you knew what they were thinking? The ability to read body language provides this valuable information.

Wouldn't it be much easier to persuade others if they liked you and trusted you? The ability to modify your own body language makes it much more likely that this will happen.

The ability to read and respond to body language was discussed by [Traci Brown](#) at the June 11 program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the [Legal Marketing Association](#), held at Sullivan's Steakhouse in LoDo Denver. Brown is a Boulder-based persuasion expert who teaches lawyers how to use body language to pick and persuade members of a jury. She is author of *Mastering Magical Persuasion* and *Body Language Confidential*.

Importance of body language

Lawyers tend to be word people. As such, they put too much emphasis on *what* they are communicating. They will spend hours researching and writing a presentation, and then simply read it. They place far too little emphasis on *how* they are communicating. This can be a huge mistake.

"Research shows that people form first impressions about the likeability and trustworthiness of another person very quickly," said Brown. "This determination of 'OK' or 'not OK' happens instantaneously in the deep unconscious. Once this impression is made, it is almost impossible to change."

According to a widely cited study by UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian, body language accounts for an overwhelming 55 percent of that impression. By comparison, 38 percent of a first impression comes from the tone of your voice and a mere seven percent from your actual words.

Body language includes how we position our bodies (including how close we stand or sit to someone), how we use our hands (including shaking hands), how people perceive our facial expressions (especially our eyes), how we touch ourselves and others, and how our bodies connect with items like pens, eyeglasses, jewelry or even the change in our pockets. It can include breathing rate and perspiration.

“If the person you are meeting is somber and guarded,” said Brown, “you will never persuade them by being cheerful and demonstrative. That will only set off their alarms.

“If you want to get different results from your efforts to persuade others, you need to do things differently,” said Brown. “To get better results in the area of business development, one of the most effective things you can do is to change your body language. With an understanding of how body language works, you can talk just about anyone into anything.”

Reading and responding to body language

An effective persuader will pay close attention to the body language of the person he or she is trying to persuade, and then mimic that body language. “People like and trust people whom they perceive to be similar to themselves,” said Brown. “The more you can be like the person you are dealing with, the more you will be able to establish essential rapport.”

Good friends and romantic partners, for example, tend to do this naturally.

Is the person you are sitting across from soft-spoken? Does he speak slowly, smile and laugh a lot? Is his notepad on the desk or his lap, does he take copious notes, are his legs crossed, is he leaning forward or backward? These are important things to notice and reflect in your own body language.

Two terms often heard in the field of neurolinguistics are mirroring and matching. “Mirroring occurs when you copy a person’s body language as if you were that person’s reflection in a mirror,” said Brown. “If the person you are facing leans to the left, for example, you lean to the right. In other words, you might both lean towards the door.

“Precisely mirroring another person at exactly the same time can be too intense,” said Brown. “It can actually backfire by making the person too uncomfortable. The only time mirroring works well is when you are sitting across from someone who is very stiff and symmetrical.”

Almost always, you want to *match* rather than mirror the person you are speaking with. “When you match, you copy the person more loosely,” said Brown. “If the person you are facing leans to the left, you lean to your left - the other way from a mirror image. If the other person leans towards the door, you would lean away from the door.

“You don’t want to do this immediately after the other person moves,” said Brown, “but perhaps five or ten seconds later, or when it is your turn to speak.

“When having a conversation, it is a good idea to stand or sit at a 45-degree angle to the person on whom you want to make a positive impression,” said Brown. “Standing or sitting right across from someone and staring them straight in the eye can be seen as confrontational and put that person on his or her guard, rather than creating rapport.”

How to interpret a handshake

Brown discussed a number of circumstances where it can be useful to understand and correctly respond to another person’s body language.

The handshake, for example, is the standard greeting in business situations. The ideal handshake is the “equal shake,” where the clasp is vertical and the grasp is firm. It says that you are meeting on common ground and want a nice, even interaction.

When the other person shakes your hand and turns their palm down, they want to dominate the interaction. The same holds true for a ‘bone crusher.’ When the person turns their palm up, they are welcoming and likely to do what you want. A limp ‘dead fish’ handshake indicates a lack of backbone. A person who shakes hand with just the fingertips is unlikely to want to do business with you.