

DEAR DR. MAZIE,

I am preparing for my first presentation to a group of peers. I feel confident that my presentation is good, but I'm worried about my ability to hold their attention. I've seen so many speakers use unnatural mannerisms or laugh nervously while pacing back and forth. I found it difficult to concentrate on what they were saying. Can you tell me some things to avoid doing?

Gayle in Chicago

It sounds like you're talking about body language. Yes, there are definitely some dos and don'ts - not just for presenters, but for all of us. Our body language can speak louder than our words, so it's important that we understand what we are communicating nonverbally.

Because our body language is in sync with where our mind is and how we feel, much of our nonverbal communication is reflexive. The key is to practice self-awareness so you can tune into what you are doing. Only then can you become self-disciplined. By continually self-monitoring, you can eradicate any behavior that can potentially create a negative image. It's a form of training yourself. And it takes lots of practice.

Here are some behaviors to watch for and work at eliminating:

- 1) **Holding objects in front of you** - Holding a coffee cup, notebook or other object in front of your body indicates shyness or resistance and says that you are trying to separate yourself from others. Try carrying things at your side instead.
- 2) **Checking your watch or inspecting your fingernails** - This is a clear sign of boredom. Many of us recall the 1992 Presidential debate when one of the candidates made this fatal mistake.
- 3) **Picking lint off your clothes** - If you do this during a conversation, especially while looking downward, most people may think you disapprove of their ideas and are uneasy about giving them honest feedback.
- 4) **Stroking your chin while listening to someone** - This is frequently done during the decision-making process, so it appears that you are making judgments when you do this.
- 5) **Touching your face while speaking** - Any kind of face touching, especially on the nose, is interpreted as a form of deception. Covering the mouth can be perceived as lying.
- 6) **Faking a smile** - Another sign of deception. A genuine smile wrinkles the corners of the eyes and changes the expression of the entire face. Fake smiles only involve the mouth and lips. It's easy to distinguish between the two.

- 7) **Resting hands behind the head or on the hips** - This can be interpreted as a sign of superiority or a big ego so refrain from using these gestures unless you're with close friends.
- 8) **Crossing your arms** - A sign of defensive resistance. It can also be interpreted as a sign of egotism. Make an effort to keep your arms open and at your sides.
- 9) **Foot and finger tapping** - This usually indicates stress, impatience or boredom. Monitor your habits and practice keeping your limbs quietly at rest.
- 10) **Fidgeting with small objects** - Clicking a pen or playing with a paper clip is a sign of anxiety or it can indicate a lack of preparedness. Practice keeping your hands at rest when you're in the presence of others.
- 11) **Shifting body weight from one foot to another** - This can indicate mental and physical discomfort or give the impression that you are trying to end a conversation, especially if you're looking elsewhere. Try not to shift more than once every two to three minutes.
- 12) **Scratching the back of your head or neck** - This is a typical sign of doubt or uncertainty. It can also be interpreted as an indication of lying, so avoid doing it at all costs.

There is so much for us to be aware of when it comes to body language, but if you can eliminate these bad habits, you are off to a good start.

Mae West, vaudeville star and film bombshell, summed it up nicely when she said, "I speak two languages, Body and English."

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

