

Watch Your Body Language

How important are the first five minutes of your interviews? If you're like most candidates, those few minutes have more impact on whether you are asked back than any other portion of the application process. "Body language can absolutely sabotage an interview," said image consultant Susan Bixler. Lack of eye contact and being hesitant about where to sit means you are apologetic about having to take up the interviewer's time. Arms crossed across the chest may be comfortable for you, but seems offsetting and closed to an interviewer. Hand motions can betray how nervous you candidate are. The way a candidate crosses his legs or leans back in his chair can also display more about his personality and attitude than his answer to the most challenging interview questions.

Image consultant Susan Bixler says you should never underestimate the importance of nonverbal communication in a job interview.

Your suit is from Brook Brothers. You've got an MBA from Harvard. Resume is awesome. Research on the company? Done. Interview, schminterview. Feelin' good. Nothing could go wrong. And then, as you're talking to the recruiter, you're not sure about what to do with your arms, so you cross them over your chest. Uh-oh, now you could be in trouble.

Like it or not, whether you get the job or not could actually hinge on what seem like superficialities, including how you shake the interviewer's hand, whether you make appropriate eye contact, and, yes, where you put your arms, says Bixler. Even though good body language alone won't land you an offer, it could tip the impression scale in your favor. On the other hand, posture that suggests you're defensive or other nonverbal blunders could take an otherwise strong candidate out the running, Bixler says.

Bixler is president of the Professional Image, an image-consulting firm that specializes in areas including nonverbal communication, wardrobe, social skills, networking and e-etiquette. The Atlanta-based company's clients include Ritz-Carlton Hotels, Deloitte & Touche, Merck, and MetLife. Bixler, the author of five books including the recent *5 Steps to Professional Presence* (Adams Media, 2000), founded the firm in 1980, after the idea came to her while she was working as a regional sales director for Bonnie Bell Cosmetics.

"As simple as it sounds, I saw women act differently with makeup on," says Bixler. "And I thought, 'There is a strong relationship between what we do on the outside and how it affects the inside.'"

Bixler recently chatted with BusinessWeek Online reporter Eric Wahlgren on how to use body language in an interview to project a winning presence on the outside and inside. Here are edited excerpts from their conversation:

Q: Is it true that hiring officials will make the decision about whether they're going to seriously consider hiring someone within the first few minutes of an interview?

A: The first five minutes of an interview are basically indelible. And it's very hard to get rid of a bad first impression. It's very difficult to erase that and start over. What we do know about the interview process is that it's only slightly more accurate than flipping a coin.

Q: So can bad body language sabotage an otherwise good interview?

A: Body language can absolutely sabotage an interview. There are a lot of ways it can be destructive. If your body language is apologetic -- if you lack eye contact, you don't extend your hand right away, you're really hesitant about where to sit, you're basically acting like you're taking up someone's time -- that will immediately set the tone that you don't have a whole lot to offer.

Being overly aggressive -- claiming too much space, having the volume of your voice too loud, not being able to sort of mirror and match what the environment is -- will also certainly work against you. So there's a balance that you have to strike.

Q: Let's go through some of the dos and don'ts in nonverbal communication. How about eye contact?

A: Well, there are two ways to look at eye contact. As a listener, you tend to make a great deal more eye contact. It's more appropriate as a listener to extend eye contact for longer periods of time.

As a speaker, it ends up being uncomfortable if you go much beyond about five seconds of eye contact. Because with five seconds of eye contact, you've made that connection. And then you almost have to break away. Otherwise, it becomes a stare-down. It becomes too intense.

Q: What about voice?

A: My suggestion is to actually record it, play it back, and listen to it. Find out if there are a lot of "ums" and "ands" or other pauses. What you want to convey is that you are someone who's friendly, confident, credible, and capable.

Q: Posture?

A: Beware of arms crossed across the chest. Sometimes it's just a comfortable place to put your arms. But to an interviewer, it looks closed. It looks like you're being possibly judgmental or evaluating in a way that isn't appropriate. It basically says, "I'm really not very interested in continuing this interview."

When someone is very engaged, the natural posture is leaning in. You want to decrease the space between you and the interviewer. But you don't want to look too eager either. So you don't want to be on the edge of the seat, hanging on every word. Posture in general should be straight but not stiff. And you can have your legs crossed comfortably.

Q: I'm glad you brought up the crossing of legs. Crossing the legs horizontally, ankle on the knee, is not considered so elegant apparently?

A: No, not so elegant. It's more male and it can be offensive to women, particularly if the sole of the guy's shoe is close to where a woman is. It's saying, "I'm male, and I'm claiming space."

Q: If you're nervous, as many of us are, in the actual interview, what do you do with your hands?

A: My suggestion is that you find a place to put them. You can comfortably rest them in your lap. Or you might have one arm on the armrest and another one on your lap. You can hold a pen. But you don't want to show nervousness through hands.

Q: What should we know about facial expressions?

A: I think you want to either stay neutral or positive. You need to study yourself in the mirror. And you may think that you're being neutral. But you look at your face, and it really looks like it's frowning.

A lot of people come up to us and say, "Smile!" or, "What's wrong with you today?" And that's because the nonverbal communication is saying something that maybe you're feeling. You want to create a neutral or positive look. It's neither happy nor sad. It's just intent and intelligent.

It certainly is appropriate to smile. But you need to decide whether you are going to smile with or without teeth. Remember, it can look almost smug if you don't show any teeth and the lips are together.

Q: A lot of things to keep in mind! Generally, we know how to prepare for an interview. We read up on the company. We talk to people who work there, etc. But how can you prepare to give all the right nonverbal messages?

A: If it's an important interview, I would suggest that you set up a camcorder and film yourself in a mock interview. Take a look at how you look. Take a look at your nervous gestures. Take a look at all the things that you're doing that may distract the interviewer from what your message is. Or practice in front of someone else. I think it is very important that we get feedback from others.

Lack of preparation will mean that you may not be able to negotiate as well as you could for your salary. Every job has a low and a high salary range. If you're asking for a promotion, you need to have a presence that shows that you deserve it. You must already look, behave, and have the nonverbal communication like someone at that next level or at that higher salary.

Q: So when you're preparing, what do you focus on conveying, whether you're about to go into an interview, a salary negotiation, or even just a business meeting?

A: My suggestion is that you have a three-word mantra. It's really kind of a self-branding. And it could be "confident, friendly, and composed." It could be "energetic, lively, and engaging." But I think you need to think about what is going to create an impact and what is a presence that you can maintain.

If you are typically quiet and reflective and say, "Oh, I'm going to be very energized and very up," that can look very forced and that can be very hard to maintain. And so it's better to say, "What's my strength? I'm going to go with my strength."

Q: Let's discuss handshakes. There are two extremes. You have the limp handshake, and you have the vice-grip one. Can you tell me the downsides of both and what we should shoot for?

A: The limp one says "I don't have any character, I'm not comfortable shaking hands, and I don't understand your culture." The bone crusher says "I'm trying to dominate. I'm trying to force my ideas. I'm trying to say a lot without using words." If you're shaking hands with an older person, the bone crusher is so inappropriate because it could be really painful. And if you're shaking hands with someone who's your equal, it almost becomes a competitive gesture.

The entire hand should be engaged, web to web, and kind of match the hand pressure of the other person. There are some people who have firm handshakes and you want to shake back just as firmly. And some people have weaker handshakes so you want a softer return. It shouldn't last longer than a "one, two, three." It's almost like a little waltz. It's accompanied with a smile and eye contact. My suggestion is you look at someone until you note the color or their eyes.

Q: On the subject of handshakes, what do you do about sweaty palms?

A: What a handshake does is it starts the meeting and ends the meeting. It's probably best to go to the restroom before and just make sure your hands are very clean and very dry. And also, cool. Some folks will really heat up under stress. To shake someone's hand that's sort of hot and soft is really unpleasant. So I even suggest using cool tap water and soap.

Q: I often see a lot of people lean back in their chairs with their hands clasped behind their head. Apparently that isn't so kosher in a buttoned-down environment?

A: That's right. It's really considered arrogant. There's a sense that, "I will absolutely open up my body to you because you are absolutely ineffective."

Q: You've written a lot about appropriate dress. What matters more, a good suit or good body language?

A: It all matters. We've all seen people who dress extremely well, and it can be great until they open their mouths, and then it doesn't matter what they have on. And we've seen people with a lot of nervous gestures. Their voice doesn't belie it, and their wardrobe doesn't either. But if there are lots of nervous gestures, there's the sense that this person is quite uncomfortable.

Q: Once you actually get the job and you're safely ensconced in the company, can you kind of let down your guard and stop worrying about all this nonverbal communication stuff?

A: Financial success and business success is based on the ability to communicate and get along with people. And communicating and getting along with people has a whole lot to do with nonverbal communication and understanding how rude behavior cuts off opportunities. It alienates people.

Q: But someone might say, "Why should I care about all this? I have a Stanford MBA. I have great track record. And yeah, maybe I'm a little arrogant. But it doesn't matter. I'm so good. Any employer would want me." What would you say to someone like that?

A: I would say that what a professional presence does is it puts a frame around all the educational credentials and experience. If you don't have a good presence, it's almost like having a terrific painting with a lousy frame. And what the lousy frame will do is detract from the beauty of the painting. And what a great frame will do is add to it.