

What You Don't Say Counts

Your Body Language during Interviews

Imagine walking in for an interview and the first thing you see is the interviewer sitting behind their desk with their arms crossed. If you sense that this person is disinterested or has reservations about you as a candidate, you are correct. The interviewer is telling you more with his or her body language than they might do verbally. Frequently, there is a mismatch between one's body posture and the words the person expresses, and when that happens, it is the nonverbal communication that is the more believable of the two.

Studies have shown that body language – at any level – accounts for approximately fifty-five percent of the response we give, thirty-eight percent comes from the intonation in someone's voice, and only seven percent is attributed to the actual words we express. Considering this, it is surprising that more people tend to practice how they will respond to standard interview questions, when in fact what they should pay attention to is what their body is saying about them at the same time.

As the example above showed, body language during an interview happens with the interviewer and the interviewee. Both need to be aware how their nonverbal communication can impact the interview.

What You Communicate as the Interviewee

Your body language begins the moment you walk into the building where the interview is to take place. There are numerous articles available about why it is important to arrive ahead of time for an interview, and what you should do to insure that this happens. Always allow extra time in case of delays or accidents, whether you drive or you use some form of public transportation – bus, train, or subway. You want to avoid arriving flustered, frustrated, or even a bit annoyed for that important, first interview. Allow yourself a few minutes to calm down to insure that your breathing is back to a normal pace, and that you are not overheated. If it is a cold, winter day, be sure that you arrive in sufficient time to avoid offering a cold hand when you first shake hands with the interviewer.

If you are asked to wait in a reception area, find a comfortable place to sit but avoid seats that make might make it difficult to stand. The same holds true for the choice of seating when you go in for the interview. If you have a choice between a sofa and hard-back chair, choose the later because it will allow you to sit in a more composed manner. If the interviewer is sitting behind a table or desk, select a chair that will allow you to have direct eye contact with them. "Eye contact is important as is open arms - indicating relaxation and confidence," says Julie Johnson, CMP, CMM, Director, Events & Incentives, LII Worldwide Heating & Cooling, in Richardson, TX. A meeting planner based in the southeast says that "As an interviewee, I try to follow the basic rules of not fidgeting, sitting properly, and maintaining eye contact (without staring them down)."

How you sit in a chair also says a lot about you as an individual. The key is to begin with your back against the chair but not so you appear stiff or uncomfortable. As the interview progresses, you can lean forward to show your interest. Johnson concurs with this and finds that "When the interviewee leans forward and sits on the edge of the chair, I can tell they are interested and are indicating excitement." First of all, a firm handshake at the beginning indicates confidence. I can tell when someone is interested and excited about the job by their body language."

Below are a list of body postures and what they say about you; review the list to see if these are things you do that may be giving messages you did not intend to present:

Walking tall, erect and briskly = Confidence
Standing with hands on hips = Readiness, aggression
Walking with hands in pockets, shoulders hunched = Dejection
Hands clasped behind back = Anger, frustration, apprehension
Sitting with legs crossed, foot kicking slightly = Boredom
Sitting with arms crossed on chest = Defensiveness
Sitting with hands clasped behind head, legs crossed = Confidence, superiority
Biting nails = Nervousness
Touching, slightly rubbing nose = Rejection, doubt, lying
Stroking chin = Trying to make a decision
Pulling or tugging at ear = Indecision
Patting/fondling hair = Lack of self confidence, insecurity
Rubbing hands = Anticipation
Pinching bridge of nose, eyes closed = Negative evaluation
Tilted head = Interest
Open palm = Sincerity, openness, innocence

(Source: Puzzle.com)

Keep in mind too that people have a different sense about how close they like people to get to them. If the interviewer appears more of an extrovert, allow them between eighteen to forty-eight inches. A more introverted personality is more inclined to want a bit more space.

If there is more than one interviewer, make certain that you shift your body so you make eye contact with each of them when they ask a question.

What the Interviewer is Telling You

While you are paying attention to your own body language, it is important to read the signals that the interviewer is giving you with his or her own body. In a recent interview, one job seeker said that she knew halfway through the interview that the interviewer had already made a decision that she was not the right candidate for the job. The clues - the interviewer had folded her arms and began looking at her watch, even though the interview was supposed to go another fifteen minutes.

Here are some signals that will help you understand what the interviewer is telling you:

Crossed arms - means that the person is in a defensive and reserved mood.

Open arms and hands - means that the person is open and receptive.

Standing before you with his hands inside the pockets - means he is not sure or feels suspicious.

Sitting in a chair shaking one of the legs - means he feels nervous and uncomfortable.

If his eyes are downcast and face turned away - means he is not interested in what you are saying.

With the palm of the hand holding or stroking his chin - means he is in an evaluating position and being critical.

Leaning back in his chair with both hands clasped behind his head - means he is in an analytical mood, but it is also a gesture of superiority.

Rubbing or touching his nose when answering a question - means he is not telling the complete truth.

If he maintains good eye contact and he smiles in a relaxed and happy way - means he is definitely receptive to you.

If he moves his body and sits with his feet and body pointing towards a door - means he wants to end the conservation and leave the room.

(Source: American Career Counseling Center, New York, NY)

The following are some recommended resources to help you better understand how your body language can impact and enhance your communication process:

Body Language and Its Secrets, by Susan Quilliam

The Definitive Book of Body Language, by Alan Pease and Barbara Pease

How to Read and Use Body Language, Anna Jaskolka

PeopleWatching and Body Talk, by Desmond Morris

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