

Linda Talley & Associates' White Paper on  
**Leaders and Critical Gestures for Success © 2009**

The challenge facing most leaders in business today is that they consider their words but not their gestures, or body language. McNeill (2000) posits that there are two sides to every communication and you cannot have one without the other. "To exclude the gesture side, as has been traditional, is tantamount to ignoring half of the message out of the brain." (p.139) The richness and vastness of non-verbal communication can add depth to any leader's communication style and make the emotional connection with those around them. The reason for this paper is to stretch the leader's communication strategies to include non-verbal gestures that make the emotional connection, increase productivity, and improve internal and external customer satisfaction. Oliver Wendell Holmes said "Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." Of course, that includes a woman's mind too.

#### WHY BODY LANGUAGE AND WHY NOW?

As leaders are more closely scrutinized, their words and their gestures are coming under fire. Consider the recent photo opportunities of the "picnic" Obama had to bring two lost souls together for a beer and then made a major blunder when the much aligned police officer helped the aging loquacious professor down the steps while Obama nonchalantly walked ahead. Or consider the finger gestures used by Jeff Skilling to cut into the parking line that came to light after the Enron debacle. All verbal statements made in a non-verbal manner that said a lot about all involved.

Leaders today must consider their non-verbal messages as more important today than ever because what they are saying says so much more than what they are not saying. William James, the great psychologist and philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coined the term, stream of consciousness, that he said described the flow of thoughts by the conscious mind. Today I suggest that all leaders must be aware of their *stream of communication*—their verbal and non-verbal communication which must flow together congruently and be considered in any communication and relationship. In fact, research shows that whenever there is a mixed message or double message, one should always believe the non-verbal message and put a question mark by the verbal message. As we have seen on the TV or in pictures, a leader can say one thing which may not be true but their body language will always tell the truth whether it be a CEO telling a lie about the

company's state of affairs or expenditures or a President of the United States telling a lie about an affair. The body is always telling the truth even when the person's mouth is not.

## WHAT SPEAKS THE LOUDEST?

The leader's eyes are always noticed because they are always talking. When a leader has an audio or visual learning style, they use their eyes to think back, to remember what was said or remember a visual picture of what happened. This creates a disconnect with the person the leader is speaking with. In order to remedy this non-verbal communication slip, focus on the other person to determine their communication style and respond with key words that connect with their learning style. Keep in mind that the person who maintains eye contact the longest is the perceived leader. The person with the most eyes looking at them is also the perceived leader. If you are being interviewed by the press, during a face-to-face interview, make certain you have several of your "people" in the room looking at you so the power balance is maintained because you have the most eyes looking at you. If you can help it, never attend a TV studio interview alone, unless you are quite used to being interviewed and then again, it's always good to bring another person(s) along.

Next consider your hand and arm movements. What do your hands say to the audience? Are your hands folded in front of you in the humility position? Is this the message you want to send? Certainly there are times when the humility position is necessary but consider the implications carefully. Are your hands in the steepling position—fingertips touching as if in prayer? This is a very authoritarian position and it also speaks to feelings of superiority. It can sometimes be too harsh for the audience you are addressing. If your goal is to make a point and come across as the authority on this issue, then this hand gesture is appropriate. This hand gesture would also work well at Board and shareholder meetings when you have a firm position to maintain. Steepling hand gestures send a strong message that you know what you are talking about, you feel confident about the subject and yourself.

As a frequent flyer with Continental Airlines, I remember watching a short video clip of Larry Kellner talking about the men and women at Continental and he used a steepling gesture. The thought that came to my mind as I watched him was, if the pilot can't get travelers to keep their seat belts fastened, how effective as an authoritarian would Mr. Kellner be? He also used community hands (palms up) which seemed much more

effective as a way to be inclusive with those watching the video rather than create a power imbalance with viewers/customers with the steeping hands.

The late Ted Kennedy used authoritarian hand gestures on numerous occasions more so than community hands. He was saying non-verbally that he had a point and people should listen. He might have been a brilliant man but his non-verbal communication was very clear. He was also very ego-centric. In January 2008 when he threw his support behind Obama, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg introduced him. As he profusely thanked her for the introduction, as he said how proud her parents would have been of her and on and on about how great she was, not once did he look at her. He did not want to give up his leadership position to her on that stage. This is a perfect example of what the body is saying that the mouth is not. Even though he praised her profusely, by not making eye contact, he was negating everything he said about her and making her feel invisible. Essentially, he was the leader and was not going to share the spotlight.

And it is not just with the rich, the famous, the politicians, leaders in all walks of life use hand gestures that may negate an emotional connection with another. While attending to some banking business one day, as I waited for the next teller to become available, I noticed a bank customer enter the front door, take off his hat and walk towards the bank president's office. The bank officer saw him, got up from his desk and came outside his office to greet the customer. After the handshake, the bank officer put his hands behind his back, the left palm resting and being supported by the right palm. When the customer saw this movement, he took one step back away from the banker, said a few words and then put his hat back on and turned to leave. This seemed to confuse the banker. It did not confuse me. The banker's hands behind the back shows superiority and arrogance and the customer picked up on that immediately, although probably subconsciously. As the customer walked out the door, the banker shook his head in disbelief. It really wasn't so unbelievable, it was just that the banker was not aware of the body language he was using and how it impacted his customer. Even in today's market, a banker must always be aware of what his customer's are feeling and thinking—not just what they are saying.

What about a retail sales leader? Recently I was shopping at a women's fashion store. I found several pants suits that had fabulous colors and textures and decided to try them on. The first one, although gorgeous, did not do a thing for me and I did not need a second opinion to know that. The second one was fabulous and I knew I would buy it without a second thought. The third was somewhere in the middle. As the sales

associate asked if I needed assistance, I came out of the dressing room and stood in front of the mirror as we both viewed the outfit. I had an uncertain feeling that it would not work but the sales associate's non-verbal language said it all. She stood behind me peering into the mirror at my reflection. Her right arm was crossed over her chest and holding onto her left arm which was bent at the elbow in order for her left hand to cover her mouth. When I saw this, I laughed and said that she was right, the suit looked terrible on me. She protested that she hadn't said a word but her body language had spoken loud and clear. Her non-verbal message, left hand over her mouth, said everything that she couldn't say verbally.

Leaders should keep their fingers away from their mouths. Anytime I see a finger over the mouth, I know that what is going to be said next is probably not the truth. Think of Bill Clinton and the grand jury hearings. How many times did he put his fingers to his mouth? Numerous times. There is also the move to cover the mouth but at the last minute, the nose is itched. Same situation, only it's the advanced version of deception.

#### IF THE LEADER IS TO BE BELIEVED

Transparency is a much emphasized and expected leadership trait, as stated in academic literature, in the corporate world and as written about in numerous newspapers and magazines. To a great extent, transparency is desirable and an honest way for leaders to act.

Most agree it is the appropriate positioning for leaders within organizations, however, with the economy as it is, what should leaders say about the organization, the business, the future? Is it complete openness and frankness that leaders should display both verbally and non-verbally or is there a balance? The truth is that regardless of what a leader says about the organization, if it is not true, his/her body language will ultimately tell the truth.

So how can a leader lead if s/he says one thing and their body language says another? We may want them to be transparent and candid on the one hand but when they tell us about gloom and doom, do we lose confidence in them? It's a fine line to walk. The key to remember is that the leaders' body language will always tell on them unless they become aware and conscious of what their body language is saying. To do so a leader must understand, at all times, what positive and defensive positions s/he is sending out.

It's called being congruent and when one is congruent, what one thinks, says and the actions taken are consistent or congruent. This is the sign of a true leader.

If there is "bad" news to deliver, what is the leader to do? Even if the leader is over optimistic, his/her body language will tell the truth. If the leader is overly morbid, this behavior will attract all the naysayers and do nothing for the morale of the organization. Leaders are charged with delivering the "news" whether good or bad and it is how the leader does it both verbally and non-verbally that denotes him/her as a good leader and communicator.

The good leader and communicator uses body language in delivering good or bad messages as a way to create emotion, intention and feelings. If this quarter's results are down, anger or upset do nothing to empower the audience to do more for next quarter. What does work is when a leader can create the emotion and intention and feeling of achieving results, of walking in the audience's shoes that the two become one on their mission. This is why politicians are not believed or have very little influence with their constituency. Most have not and never will be in the shoes of their constituency. The healthcare debate is raging now and yet Congress and the Senate will not vote to have the same healthcare reform package that they are voting for their constituency to have. This is not leadership this is buffoonery. We elect them and pay them well so when we need something (to find a child lost in Aruba, to get our money back from the white collar thieves, to blow the whistle on some giant organization, etc) we can get their attention, if they represent us. The interaction between the elected official and the constituent is not about communication, it is about insurance—having someone/something in place when you need it and we pay a premium for it. But don't get it confused with communication.

Therefore, the true leader is cautious of their gestures and use gestures that bring people together in feelings and intentions and emotions. The only way to become aware of this is to be conscious when speaking to people not only about what they are saying verbally and non-verbally but also what you, as the leader, are saying non-verbally. This consciousness will either make the emotional connection or the disconnect between a leader and her/his audience. Even a very conscious communicator will make communication blunders but the wise, aware and ever conscious, as opposed to over-confident, leader will continue to create bonds with those around them on their path to success.

Being aware and conscious is vital to the growth, development and success of emerging leaders in a complex, dynamic organization and economy. Without it leaders will not understand how their non-verbal communication impacts their relationships with their followers. When leaders are pragmatic in their approach to verbal and non-verbal communication, they can be certain they are creating habits to influence others in a positive way.

#### References

McNeill, D. (2000). Language culture and cognition (No. 2). Language and Gesture. New York: Cambridge University Press.