

Body Language Secrets For People (Like Me) Who Hate Networking

✘ *By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D*

Imagine that you are at a networking event with the intent of doing business with some of the other attendees. In your mind, how's that going for you? Do you see yourself socializing with ease and grace, or – if you are anything like me – has the very word “networking” increased your stress level and sent shivers down your spine? At least that is how I used to react. I dreaded (and avoided, whenever possible) all networking events. Now I look forward to them.

Here are six changes I made in my body language that morphed my networking experience from frightening to fun. Maybe they will do the same for you . . .

1. I changed my perspective. It was a relief when I learned that networking is not about getting new business (although that certainly can happen). It's about making connections and building professional relationships. The minute I took the focus off myself and put it on others, I relaxed. I stopped selling and started listening. I also found it helpful to pretend that I was the host of the event and that my job was to help others have an enjoyable time. Approaching people with this attitude immediately resonated in a more positive way.

2. I straightened my posture. I'm a bit of a posture junkie anyway, but at networking events I found I was slouching – and by condensing my body, I looked tentative and less assured. Now, before I enter the room, I check that my shoulders are pulled back and that my arms are slightly away from my body – which is a posture of openness, confidence and self-esteem.

3. I put down my plate. My default networking behavior was to go directly to the wine and food stations – so that I would have something to do immediately upon arrival. I've learned that if I wanted people to see me as comfortable and friendly, I needed to stop using objects (my drink and plate of food) as physical barriers. It made me look closed off and resistant. And the minute I stopped blocking my body (which can also be done with a purse, briefcase, cell phone, or crossed arms), I looked and felt more open and approachable.

4. I made it a point to touch everyone I met. I knew that touch was the most primitive and powerful nonverbal signal. I knew that we are programmed to feel closer to someone who's touched us. (A study on handshakes by the Income Center for Trade Shows showed that people are twice as likely to remember you if you shake hands with them.) But it was difficult to shake hands when clutching that plate of food! Once I freed my hand, I was able to offer it whenever I introduced myself. The result was just what research predicted it would be: people reacted by being more open and friendly – making engaging them in conversation much easier.

5. I slowed down my smile. I knew that charismatic people tended to smile more, with that distinctive crinkling around the eyes that was a sign of genuine emotion. (Which I thought I was already pretty good at.) But I also learned that **slow onset smiles led to more positive reactions. So, rather than approaching people with a grin, I learned to begin with a slight smile and let it grow organically.**

6. I ramped up my eye contact. Looking at someone's eyes transmits energy and indicates interest. I found that networking events provided a prime opportunity for enhancing this skill. I made it a practice to notice the eye color of everyone I met. This meant that I held my gaze just a little bit longer (which made it feel just a little bit more personal) than usual.

Focus on the other person (make it about them, not you). Stand tall and let your body show others that you are confident – which changes your self-perception as well. Open your body: no barriers, no crossed arms or other defensive postures. Smile sincerely and slowly. Make positive eye contact. Reach out and touch someone. It's not rocket science – but it does have the power to transform a dreaded networking event into a positive experience!

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