

# Is Your Good Body Language a Bad Choice?

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I want to tell you a story about Adam and Eve.

No, not *that* Adam and Eve.

The Adam and Eve I'm talking about are both being groomed to take larger leadership roles. And both are aware that body language is an important part of projecting the leadership presence that will help them succeed.

This is their story:

**Adam's** assignment was to facilitate a highly collaborative meeting in which all team members would be encouraged to share insights and concerns about an upcoming project.

Before he met with the team, Adam had assumed a “power pose” position – with hands on hips and feet wide apart to get all the advertised benefits of doing so. And it worked. He could almost feel his stress level lowering and his self-confidence rising. By the time he strode into the meeting room, took his place at the head of the table, and made strong eye contact with all the participants, Adam exuded authority, power and status.

**Eve** was at her first strategy session with executives and saw this as an opportunity to be perceived as the credible and competent leader she truly was.

Naturally empathetic and likable, Eve automatically smiled a lot, nodded to encourage others to continue speaking and tilted her head in the universal sign of “giving someone your ear.” She waited politely before interjecting her own thoughts, and when she did, she spoke in a soft warm voice.

Both Adam and Eve exhibited good leadership body language. But both made bad choices for projecting leadership presence.

In the workplace, we continuously and unconsciously assess leaders for two distinct sets of nonverbal signals. The first is warmth/likability/empathy and the second is authority/power/status. The art of blending warmth and authority cues is the essence of effective body language for leaders . . . most of the time. There are business situations, however, when emphasizing one set of signals over the other gives you the advantage.

Power, status, and confidence are non-verbally displayed in height and space. The ability to project authority is a body language strength. But, like any strength, when overused or inappropriately used, that asset can become a liability. And it’s easy for power signals to slip into signs of arrogance. If your status signals are too strong, you can come across as arrogant, uncaring, or insensitive.

When it comes to facilitating collaborative teams and building high trust work environments, high-power behaviors can undermine your efforts. After all, if you act like “the boss who has all the answers,” why would anyone else need – or dare – to contribute?

Adam would have been more effective if he had looked more inclusive and less “in charge.” For example, he might have taken a seat in the middle of the table instead of the “power position” at the end. He could have remembered to smile more, to nod and to turn his entire body toward whomever spoke, silently indicating that he was giving others his full attention because their contributions mattered.

Eve faced an entirely different leadership situation, and the very cues that might have been so helpful to Adam were detrimental for her.

Warm body language including head tilts, nods and forward leans, definitely send signals of friendliness, interest and inclusion, but excessive or inappropriate warm signals can also be a credibility robber. Even a smile (which is the most positive display of warmth) is counter-productive if you smile too much when delivering a serious message or stating an objection. There are also cases where warm cues (like the head tilt) can make you look submissive – which, for Eve, was not the best image to project when her goal was to impress executives with her confidence and expertise.

Eve’s head tilts worked well when she wanted to demonstrate interest in other members of the team, but when she stated her own opinions she would have been wiser to keep her head straight in a more authoritative position. Her soft-spoken vocal responses also worked against her, lessening the impact of her comments by making them seem tentative. She needed to speak up in a stronger voice if she wanted her remarks to reflect her genuine competence.

My best advice for Adam and Eve – and for any leader – is to understand that body language is most effective when it is aligned with your intent. If you are in a situation where you want to be evaluated as authoritative, make sure that you are displaying nonverbal signals of confidence and power to reinforce that message. On the other hand, if your goal is to build collaboration, use your warmer signals to encourage others to contribute. By adjusting your body language, you can optimize your leadership effectiveness – and build your leadership presence.

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