

The Body Language of Collaborative Leaders

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During a break in my seminar on collaborative leadership, a man from the audience told this story: “My wife is an attorney, and I have always been a supporter of women in the workplace. I also believe in collaboration and try to make everyone feel included and appreciated. So I was totally taken aback when a woman on my management team said that I didn’t value her opinion. I assured her that I valued and relied on her insights and had often told her so. But then I got curious and asked her what I was doing that made the opposite impression. She said, ‘In meetings, you don’t look at me when I speak.’”

Then, he said, “My question to you is, how could this one small nonverbal cue have had such a powerful impact?”

His inquiry was well timed because the topic I was about to cover after break was the body language of collaborative leaders.

Our brains are hardwired to respond instantly to certain nonverbal cues, and that circuitry was put in place a long time ago – when our ancient ancestors faced threats and challenges very different from those we face in today’s modern society.

For example, in our prehistory, it may have been vitally important to see an approaching person’s hands in order to evaluate his intent. If hands were concealed they could very well be holding a rock, a club, or other means of doing us harm. In interactions today, with no logical reason to do so, you will instinctively mistrust me if my hands stay out of sight – shoved in my pockets or clasped behind my back.

The world has changed, but our body-reading processes are still based on a primitive emotional reaction. Today, the potential threats (and our brains are always on the alert for potential threats) are to our ego, our self-esteem, our identity. We are especially vulnerable in our desire to be included, to feel valued, to belong. This is why collaborative leaders need to be aware of their body language.

Think of it this way: In any interaction you are communicating over two channels – verbal and nonverbal – resulting in two distinct conversations going on at the same time. What my audience member underestimated was the power of alignment – that is, the spoken word needs to be aligned with body language that supports it. When this alignment doesn't occur, the other person has to choose between the words and the body language. Almost always, she will believe the nonverbal message.

There are two sets of body-language cues that people instinctively look for in leaders. One set projects warmth and caring and the other signals power and status. Both are necessary for leaders today but, for a Chief Collaborator, the “warmer side” of nonverbal communication (which has been undervalued and underutilized by leaders more concerned with projecting strength, status, and authority), becomes central to creating the most collaborative workforce relationships.

When you use warm, “pro-social” body language with all team members, you create an emotionally rich environment that supports collaboration and high performance. Here are some examples of what I mean: A genuine smile not only stimulates your own sense of well-being, it also tells those around you that you are approachable, cooperative, and trustworthy. A genuine smile comes on slowly, crinkles the eyes, lights up the face, and fades away slowly. By way of contrast, a counterfeit or “polite” smile comes on quickly and never reaches the eyes.

Since collaboration depends on participants' willingness to speak up and share ideas and insights, try using your head – literally. Research shows that you can increase participation by nodding your head with clusters of three nods at regular intervals.

Head tilting is also a signal that you are interested, curious, and involved. The head tilt is a universal gesture of giving the other person an ear. As such, head tilts can be very positive cues when you want to encourage people to expand on their comments.

And, as the man in my audience found out, one of the most powerful motivators to encourage participation is eye contact, because people feel that they have your attention and interest as long as you are looking at them. As a leader, you set the tone for the meeting. If you want people to speak up, focus on whomever is talking to make sure that he or she feels you are listening.

When talking with someone we like or are interested in, we subconsciously switch our body posture to match that of the other person – mirroring his or her nonverbal behavior. When you synchronize your body language with members of your team, you signal that you are connected and engaged.

You look more receptive when you uncross your legs and hold your arms comfortably away from your body (not folded across your chest or tight into your waist) with palms exposed or hands resting on the desk or conference table.

Positive attitudes toward others tend to be accompanied by leaning forward – especially when sitting down. When two people like each other, you'll see them both lean in. Research also shows that individuals who lean forward tend to increase the verbal output of the person they're speaking with. Also, face people directly. Even a quarter turn away creates a barrier (the "cold shoulder"), signaling a lack of interest

and causing the speaker to shut down.

Physical obstructions are especially detrimental to the effective exchange of ideas. Take away anything that blocks your view or forms a barrier between you and the rest of the team. Close your laptop, turn off your cell phone, put your purse or briefcase to the side.

If you think it makes you look more efficient (or important) to be continually checking a laptop or cell phone for messages, I'd advise you to think again. As one member of a management team recently told me, "There's this senior exec in our department who has a reputation of being totally addicted to his smart phone—which is especially distracting during internal meetings. When he finally focuses on others, peers make jokes about his 'coming back to earth.' The result is that when he does contribute, he has little credibility."

The bottom line is: If you really want to foster collaboration, make sure you look and act like you do!