Body Language

Communicating in a Positive Way without Words

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RCCTA Resource Center for CareerTech Advancement

Communicating in a Positive Way without Words

Body language and mannerisms play a key role in communicating thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Your non-verbal communication can have as much impact as your spoken words. Your body language can betray you by giving mixed messages—You may be saying one thing with your words, but your facial expression may reveal the opposite.

The receptionist or front desk staff may also be a member of the hiring team. That means that your posture in the waiting area, the way you talk to people, and how you respond to others are all important details. When you enter the room, go directly (but not aggressively) to the receptionist and state your purpose. For example, say "Hello, my name is Amy Jones and I have an appointment with Mr. DeWitt at 2:00." Remember to smile naturally as you do this.

When you are shown to the interview area, follow a few steps behind, without crowding or falling far behind. If you are asked to be seated, find a chair that is not too low or soft; it can be awkward getting up from a chair or sofa that you have sunken down into.

Don't tap your fingers on the arm of the chair or couch, whistle, or clear your throat repeatedly. These habits, as well as pacing back and forth, tell everyone that you are nervous. Instead, smile pleasantly and nod or speak quietly to others waiting with you. These gestures indicate confidence and composure in unfamiliar settings—qualities that employers notice and appreciate.

As you are shown into the interview room or office, look directly at the interviewer, smile, and say "Thank you." The way you carry yourself as you walk says a lot about your confidence level and how comfortable you feel. If you enter an interview room with poor posture and downcast eyes, you send the message that you are nervous and lack confidence. Keep one hand free for a handshake. Let the interviewer take the lead, but return a firm, friendly grasp. A too-strong handshake can come across as aggressive.

Be seated when invited to do so. If you have a choice, take a chair to either side of the desk rather than directly across from the interviewer. Sitting to one side helps to remove a physical barrier and makes it easier to establish a connection. Women should straighten their skirts as they are seated. Both men and women should sit far enough back in the chair to avoid sitting "at attention" on the front edge of the chair. This will make you appear uncomfortable throughout the interview. No other part of the back, however, should touch the chair. This helps to prevent slouching and appearing too relaxed and inattentive.

Proper posture varies depending on gender.

- Women should cross their legs at the ankle, placing the feet to one side under the front edge of the chair. If you have short legs, you might find it necessary to point the lower leg so the toe of one shoe stays in contact with the floor. This keeps you from swinging your legs because they don't touch the floor. Women in skirts should NEVER cross their legs at the knee. Besides being unflattering, this position can appear as flirting. Sitting with both feet flat on the floor, knees and ankles firmly together, is another option, but it can be hard to accomplish gracefully.

- Men should keep both feet firmly on the floor, slightly apart. Stretching the legs out in front of you gives the impression of being too relaxed to care about the job. You can keep your hands clasped and in front of you, resting on your thighs. A better approach may be to place one hand on each knee; this pulls your shoulders into an attentive stance and leaves your hands free for appropriate gestures.

When people are nervous, they may communicate their nervousness through their gestures. These can include swinging a leg up and down or drumming the fingers on a chair arm or desk. Other people may blink repeatedly. A good guideline is to keep gestures to a minimum. Keep a pleasant look on your face without smiling constantly. You don't want to appear either insincere or unfriendly. You should also keep your hands away from your mouth.

Maintain frequent, but not constant, eye contact with the interviewer. This communicates an attitude of confidence and composure. Unbroken eye contact can lead to physical discomfort for you and to psychological discomfort for the interviewer. Looking away from the interviewer when he or she is speaking can indicate a lack of interest. The interviewer is probably just as interested in how well you listen as in how well you respond to questions. Looking upward and away when you are speaking tells the interviewer that you do not really have a solid response and are flying by the seat of your pants. Looking down and away gives the impression of evasiveness and untruthfulness—qualities no employer wants to hire.

The best rule of thumb is to maintain eye contact when either of you is speaking, but break contact for a moment when thinking about a response or waiting for the next question.

Stay alert to signs from the interviewer that it is time to end the interview. Stacking papers, closing notebooks, and pushing away from the desk are signs that things are wrapping up. At this point, you don't want to start a long story.

When the interview is finished, thank the interviewer for his or her time and the opportunity to be considered for the position. This time, you can take the initiative by extending your hand for a handshake. Remember to be firm but not painful. This is a good opportunity to confirm your interest in working for the company and to ask when you might expect to hear of a hiring decision.

As you leave, walk smoothly and confidently; people are still paying attention to you until you are out of the room. On the way out, take time to thank the receptionist or front desk staff for their assistance during your visit. A sincere, friendly acknowledgment is appreciated and may separate you in a positive way from other applicants.