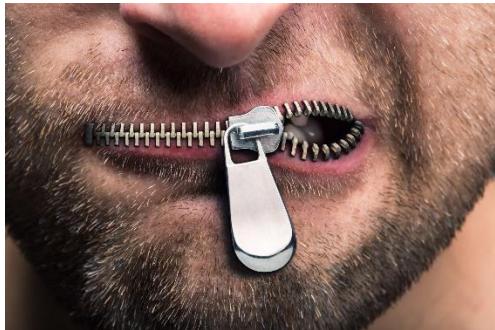


Body Language 31

Silence

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



A very powerful form of body language is actually associated with a verbal behavior. It has to do with the lack of expected verbal output called silence.

Skilled speakers know that when they really need the audience's attention, they simply have to stop talking for several seconds and all eyes will be on them. The reason is that when people are subjected to a drone of input, they can mentally

check out of the conversation and think about something else, like what to cook for dinner, or what they need to buy at the store.

Most people can think at a rate from 3-6 times faster than people can speak, so there is a lot of excess mental capacity. If they are multitasking and listening to the spoken words while day dreaming about other things, they will be shocked when the background noise simply stops.

Skilled negotiators know that the silent treatment will often gain a concession from the other person. This is because most people can tolerate a break in the point counter - point for only a few seconds before they become extremely uncomfortable.

I learned how powerful silence is in a negotiation I had with a Japanese executive, decades ago. I had just completed The Chester Karrass Negotiating Course, so when the Japanese executive tried to use the silent treatment on me, I knew the technique and was able to reverse the logic.

We were haggling about the price of a large supply of components. I wanted to pay no more than 41 cents per piece, and he was stuck at 44 cents. I told him I had to get 41 cents and he just went silent. Since it was his turn to talk, I just let the silence settle between us and calmly looked into his eyes.

At first, he had a look of confidence because he knew that most Westerners cannot tolerate silence for more than about 30 seconds. I just watched his face and stared back at him. Over the next minute or two, I saw a remarkable transition in his body language. First, I could see he knew I was aware of his trick, but it was his turn to talk.

I then watched as his blinking rate went up by 100% and small beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. I knew that the Japanese hate conflict in negotiations, so I was blissfully watching his stress level go through the roof. Finally, he lowered his head and muttered, "Okay, 41 it is." He had been defeated by his own tactic.

When most people get excited or want to make a key point, they raise their volume and talk faster. We have learned to expect that behavior from a person who is somehow agitated. It is a shock if instead of louder and faster, they hear lower and slower or even silence altogether.

This ploy is often effective when buying a car from a dealer. If it is your turn to talk, just try saying nothing and count the seconds until the salesman starts talking again. Keep quiet and see if a concession is coming your way.

One precaution on using silence to gain leverage: if the other person knows the game, you can get caught like my Japanese friend did. Since it was his turn to talk, I could simply outwait him and let the stress he had intended for me boomerang back on him. If you have ever tried to do a staring contest with another individual, you know how hard it can be to keep silent for more than a minute.

If you are speaking to a group, try an occasional few seconds of silence to keep people focused on your content. You will find it to be more powerful than you can imagine. If someone tries to throw you off with a silent treatment, simply wait the person out, and you can reverse the outcome.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language." The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

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