

## Successful Supervisor Part 10

### Body Language

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have been fascinated with body language for several decades. I have studied it for countless hours and believe I have only scratched the surface of this complex area of communication. We all are skilled at reading the body language of others. Another person does not need to talk to let us know she is upset, happy, tired, fearful, confused, and hundreds of other descriptors.

While we are all good at reading signals from other people, few of us have a really good working knowledge of some of the more subtle forms of body language. This article shines a light on how supervisors who are skilled at reading the body language of others and controlling their own have a huge advantage in the workplace.

Decades ago, the behavioral scientist Albert Mehrabian did a series of experiments at UCLA. He tried to measure what percent of meaning comes from the words we use when we talk face to face with another individual about our feelings or emotions. His famous experiments revealed that only about 7% of the meaning comes from the words we use. 38% of meaning comes from our tone of voice, and a whopping 55% of meaning comes from our body language.

The sad thing is that you rarely see a course in school, even graduate school, that deals with how to interpret body language. The topic is covered on some titillating websites that try to help people interpret the signals of possible mates in bars or other such entertaining information. You rarely see the topic taught as a serious study for leaders. I find that strange and always include a heavy dose of body language awareness in my work with leaders at all levels.

The first thing to recognize is that the amount of body language that is available for interpretation is immense. Most people take in only a few percentage points of what they might if they were properly educated and paying attention. The reason is that, for most people, the received body language is taken in subconsciously. Likewise, we are normally unaware of the majority of body language we are sending. Facial expressions are the most intentional aspect of body language, and even there we send a lot more signals than we realize. If we could make it more intentional both on the giving and

receiving end, we could improve communication between people an enormous amount with little extra effort.

If you study the Quality of Work Life Studies that are done in corporations, you can see that almost universally what employees feed back to managers is that the number one or number two deficiency in the company is COMMUNICATION. Yet with all that obvious input, you rarely see leadership classes that specialize in body language or listening skills, which are two rich sources of communication improvement. It is really astounding.

For any supervisor, becoming more skilled at these elements of leadership is the fastest way to improve her performance. Unfortunately for me, these skills are not easily covered adequately in a blog article. I did one [video on body language](#) that highlighted how important it is when first meeting people. I call it "Planting the Seeds of Trust in the First 10 Seconds."

I think for supervisors, the most important part of body language is to ensure the signals she is sending are consistent with her desires. I have no idea how she would do that if she has no education on the topic. There are many good books on the subject, and of course I have a full program that I do with leaders in my consulting work.

There is lots of information online. One good test to see how well you interpret facial expressions is located at the site of the [Greater Good](#). There is another good site on [Business Balls](#) that gives a lot of helpful information. I also happen to like a DVD Produced by Bill Acheson, a body language expert from University of Pittsburg. The title is [Advanced Body Language](#).

One thing to be aware of is that body language is different for different cultures. You need to learn how people from the culture you are supervising send out signals. You must not assume their signals are the same as yours. Be alert to misunderstandings due to this aspect and get some education. For example, if you are an American and you are supervising several people in a call center who are from the Far East, you need to take a lot more care to understand their points.

Probably the most significant help I can be in this brief article is to suggest the supervisor simply pay a lot more attention to the body language she is seeing with her people. Learn to interpret signals more consciously and also pay attention to how you are communicating with people via body language. There is no substitute for specific knowledge, but awareness is always available and will help.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

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