

3 Body Language Mistakes Leaders Make



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How to send nonverbal messages that build trust and connection



Imagine a workplace in which you are never quite sure if you should approach your leader or not. You can't quite put your finger on why, but it just always seems like it's not the right time to bring a question or idea to him. In fact, while you would love to get his feedback or insight, you're afraid that you'll annoy or frustrate him if you interrupt his workflow or bring a problem to his door. In short, you are anxious to approach him unless invited. He feels inaccessible to you on a consistent basis.

Sounds stressful, yes?

Now, consider the possibility that your own team members might feel this way about you.

If you're thinking that your employees couldn't possibly feel that way about your leadership, I encourage you to think twice. While most of us have great intentions to communicate accessibility and approachability, we often fall short thanks (or no thanks) to our nonverbal communication.

Our nonverbal behavior sends both intended and unintended messages to our team members.

When I talk with managers about their leadership development, almost all of them emphasize books they read on vision casting, organizational strategy, public speaking, or conflict management.

Almost none of them mention ongoing education and training in nonverbal communication. Yet, it is arguably one of the most important aspects of our leadership, as it influences the verbal messages we send and receive on a daily basis. In countless ways, our nonverbal behavior shapes our workplace culture.

So let's spend some time together emphasizing nonverbal behavior and leadership. It'll be worth it.

Below, I'll discuss 3 ways that leaders communicate unapproachability or inaccessibility to their team members. Then I'll discuss some practical strategies you can use to improve your nonverbal behavior in the workplace.

3 Nonverbal Mistakes You Might Be Making

1. You use an indirect body orientation, closed posture, or increase physical space between you and your employees



Molly has approached her supervisor's office door to ask a question about a project she's been working on this week. Molly's supervisor, Shauna, is sitting at her desk working on her computer. Upon hearing Molly in the doorway, Shauna turns her head, makes eye contact and offers a friendly greeting.

"Do you have a minute?" Molly asks. "I need to run something by you."

"Of course," Shauna says. "What's up?"

Shauna keeps her head turned towards Molly during the interaction, but her shoulders and torso remain facing her computer and her fingers stay poised on her keyboard. After a few moments, Molly interprets Shauna's nonverbal behavior to mean that she doesn't want to discuss the issue at this time. She walks away feeling frustrated and worried she annoyed Shauna.

Did Shauna mean to communicate she wasn't invested in the question Molly brought to her office? Perhaps. But what's more likely is that Shauna didn't consider how her body orientation and posture would send messages to Molly.

Body orientation refers to the ways we position our bodies in interactions with others. An **indirect body orientation** describes what our bodies look like when we direct our attention away from another person and toward something else. We might turn our heads,

shoulders, bodies, or even our feet away from the other person, effectively distancing ourselves from the interaction.

Our body orientation often reveals what we're interested in, and this is why it's so important for leaders to use a **direct body orientation** when interacting with their team members. When we use a direct body orientation with another person, our bodies are parallel, and we have effectively distanced ourselves from the many distractions surrounding us. It communicates that we're invested in the interaction and we were willing to block out everything else competing for our attention.

Even when we don't intend to communicate that our interests are elsewhere, that's exactly what we do when we use an indirect body orientation.

Similarly, we also want to use an **open body posture**, which is characterized by an upright but relaxed posture, open hands and expansive gestures, and the removal of barriers such as objects or limbs between us and our listeners.

Contrast this with a **closed body posture**, in which we might slouch, fold our arms and/or legs, place our hands on our hips, or place barriers between ourselves and our listeners. Imagine the leader who holds a legal pad to her chest for an entire meeting, or the leader who crosses his arms while an employee shares an idea or discusses a problem. This type of closed posture communicates disinterest and possibly even discomfort.

And finally, consider the ways in which we use direct eye contact to reduce physical and psychological distance when we're communicating with others. Even when used in a crowded and noisy room, direct eye contact has the power to make another person feel seen and heard. When we block out other distractions by looking them in the eyes, our employees will sense our investment in them.

And what about when you can't maintain direct eye contact? Verbalize it. It will make an enormous difference in how your nonverbal behavior is interpreted. Try this:

"I am just going to look at these numbers while you're talking, but I'm listening. Keep going."

So next time you are interacting with a team member, make an intentional effort to use a direct body orientation, an open posture, and direct eye contact. You'll send the message that you value the interactions you share together.

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2. You consistently look too stressed or too busy to be bothered



We're always scanning our environments to determine if we feel safe and comfortable to communicate with others. If we sense that others are busy or stressed-out, we will be very hesitant to initiate conversation or ask questions, lest we frustrate or annoy them.

Likewise, our team members are paying close attention to our emotional states and nonverbal behavior to determine if they should approach us or not.

If I'm always in a hurry, frantically walking through the office with my head down, I will send a message that I don't have even a second to spare for my team members.

If I maintain a rigid and tense posture during meetings, coupled with a vocal rate that rivals that of an auctioneer, my team members will assume now is not the time to bring up a potential problem or a great idea.

If my team members never see me smiling or laughing on the job, they will feel unsafe to do the same, especially in my presence.

If I'm always rushing in and out of the office, talking on the phone or checking email, my team members will perceive me as inaccessible to them.

They will feel unseen, unheard, and unimportant.

This is an area of vulnerability for me, personally. For as long as I can remember, and especially when I'm at my worst, I have tried to stuff as much activity and accomplishment into one day as humanly possible. As a result, I can be both burned-out and physically but not mentally present with others, especially when I'm behind on my to-do list.

I first realized this was an issue for me a few years ago when one of my staff members caught me in the hall and the first words out of her mouth were, "I'm so sorry to bother you with something so little, but..."

And it hit me.

It was the FOURTH time that week that one of my staff had said something similar to me.

See, I had a bad habit of walking through the office at lightning speed, always in intense thought about my next task or project. As a result, I had unintentionally communicated that I didn't have time for them.

I didn't want them to think that about me.

But I definitely sent that message.

Because when we look too busy or too stressed, we look unapproachable.

In contrast, when we assume a relaxed yet confident posture, use vocal variety, smile and laugh and encourage our team members to do the

same, they will perceive us as psychologically present and invested in them.

When we plan to spend the first 5–10 minutes at work greeting our employees instead of making a beeline to our office, our team members will feel comfortable approaching us throughout the day. We will have communicated that we aren't too stressed or too busy to engage with them about their questions, problems, or ideas.

Ask yourself if you are guilty of this one. What kind of nonverbal behavior do you exhibit when moving throughout the office or during meetings? Do you look too stressed or too busy to be bothered? If so, make every effort to slow down and smile with your team members today.

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3. Your office space works against you



Many leaders don't take the time to analyze the way that the physical environment shapes our perceptions, expectations, and communication.

Wherever you are right now, pause and take a moment to consider your physical surroundings. How do factors such as the architecture, spatial

and furniture arrangement, design and décor, color, lighting, temperature, and scent and smell affect the type of interactions that happen in that space? How did you feel upon entering the environment? How might you feel if you interacted in this space for a prolonged period of time?

Even the most well-intentioned leaders often neglect this aspect of nonverbal communication.

A close friend of mine told me a story about a former employer he had. We'll call him Matt. Matt talked all the time about his "open door policy," and genuinely believed that his employees knew they could always come talk with him about anything.

The problem was that Matt didn't actually keep his door open. On top of that, his office was in the back corner of the building and employees would have to walk through two different conference rooms BEFORE encountering Matt's administrative assistant in a waiting area. If this "gatekeeper" granted the employee access to Matt's office, the employee was the one who had to physically open the door to speak with Matt.

Needless to say, Matt's "open door policy" was mostly useless. In fact, it was a joke around the office.

And that's a shame, because more than likely Matt was a caring leader who felt he was doing enough by verbally communicating his accessibility.

But that's not enough.

If we've made it too hard for our team members to gain physical access to our office space when they need us, we are likely communicating that we're inaccessible or unapproachable.

If we create unnecessary rules or policies about how we are to be approached, we should expect that our employees won't feel comfortable asking for a minute of our time.

Instead, we should take the time to think critically and strategically about our work spaces, making every effort to create environments that facilitate the kind of communication and interaction we're desiring.

Our office spaces should reflect the vision, mission, and purpose of our organizations.

They should make our employees feel they are seen and valued.

And they should communicate that our door is actually open.

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Become a Nonverbally Immediate Leader



I've discussed just three of the many different mistakes leaders can make with respect to nonverbal communication. All in all, the most effective leaders use what we call **nonverbally immediate** behaviors in the workplace. Communication researchers Anderson and Guerrero describe immediacy behaviors as indicating physical and psychological closeness, approachability, interest, and interpersonal warmth (Andersen, 1985; Andersen & Guerrero, 1998).

So what does the nonverbally immediate leader look like?

1. They display a relaxed posture, and have a direct body orientation and open body posture

2. They use expressive and responsive facial expressions (and they smile and laugh at work)
3. They use open and expansive gestures
4. They reduce physical distance and barriers when possible
5. They make direct and sustained eye contact
6. They use appropriate touch for the workplace (warm handshakes, “knuckles,” high fives)
7. They use vocal variety (rate, pitch, intonation, volume)
8. They create spaces that facilitate communication and collaboration

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So How Do We Get There?

If you feel overwhelmed at the thought of improving your nonverbal immediacy, you aren't alone. The good news is there are things you can start doing today that will make an immediate difference (pun 100% intended).

Start with this.

Practice **Self-Monitoring**, the process of paying close attention to your nonverbal behavior and using these observations to shape future interactions and behavior.

- **Record yourself in a meeting.** Then watch it back to evaluate your nonverbal immediacy. Right now, you're talking yourself out of this one, because it sounds like your worst nightmare. We've been there, and we can tell you that the activity of watching yourself, while unquestionably painful, will give you so much perspective and insight into how your team members perceive you on a daily basis. Ask yourself: Which behaviors are nonverbally immediate? Which are not? Which area needs the most improvement?

- **Ask others for feedback.** Choose a member or two on your team who you trust and ask them for insight and feedback about any nonverbal behaviors you use that might communicate a negative message. Often times, it's the nonverbal behaviors you have no awareness of that send the strongest messages.
- **Focus on improving one area at a time.** To keep from feeling overwhelmed and hopeless, try focusing on using a direct body orientation for an entire week. Or focus on putting down your cell phone when you're walking through the office. Soon it will feel more natural and you'll see and feel the improvement in your interactions with team members. Then you can work on a different nonverbally immediate behavior.

Your team members deserve to feel confident approaching you at work, and you have the ability to communicate nonverbally that you see, hear, and appreciate them and their contributions.

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