

# Eye contact, body language and gesture

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## **Introduction**

When you are in earnest conversation with a friend (or enemy) you will nearly always be using appropriate facial expressions and gesture. Funnily, when delivering a 'prepared speech' you may feel uncomfortable.

Your job is to enhance the delivery of your message by appropriate use of your

- Eyes
- Facial expression
- Hand gestures
- Body movement

But you can detract from your message by inappropriate actions.

You must also tailor gesture to the size of the audience. Around a committee table you can only use eyes, face and limited hand movements. To a small audience, hands are useful, but whole arm gestures and body movement may seem like overacting and insincere. In a stage presentation to a large audience, you can act much larger than life.

Let's look at each of the visual tools you have at your disposal to convey your real meaning to an audience:

### **Eyes**

- DO look at one person for a sentence at least, then switch to another person.. then another...then another... (If you are too shy to meet their eyes, look just over their shoulder.. but not over their head)
- DO NOT stare at the ceiling, or at the screen if you are using visual aids, or down at your notes while speaking. (when you do refer to notes, stop speaking until you are looking at people again).
- DO NOT use the searchlight technique...each person in the audience deserves your individual attention, even if there are too many for you to speak to each individual.

### **Facial expressions**

- DO express your feelings as if you were talking to a single person. It's natural.
- DO smile at the audience before you start speaking, and try to get at least one of them to smile back. It will relax you enormously.
- DO NOT over-animate your facial expressions unless you are deliberately being comical, or whatever.

### **Hands**

- DO use your hands to illustrate a point.. eg. the size and shape of an object ("it was HUGE"), a direction, counting on your fingers to enumerate important points, even an appeal such as 'trust me' ... or "I really mean that!"..
- DO NOT move your hands so much that they become meaningless. Keep them still until you want to use them to emphasise a point, or whatever..

(If you can't control them, hold them loosely at your side, but not behind your back or in front of your groin... those gestures convey other meanings). If you put one in your pocket the audience

will think that you are relaxed, but that might not be the impression you want to create in that particular speech.

### **Body movement**

- DO stand up straight, with head up.. it helps you speak louder.
- DO NOT slouch with your hands in your pockets, or sit on the edge of a table UNLESS you want to convey the impression that what you are saying isn't really important.
- DO move around on the platform IF it suits what you are saying. For example you can move two steps to one side deliberately to emphasise a change in direction of your speech, or a different speaker if you are reading a dialogue..
- DO NOT roam from one side of the platform to the other. Your audience will be betting on whether you will fall off the edge, not listening to what you are saying.
- TRY YOUR BEST NOT to use repetitive, meaningless gestures or mannerisms, such as:
  - Continual pointing
  - Putting spectacles on and taking them off, and pointing with them.
  - Swaying from side to side
  - Touching your nose or your hair (or flicking it back if it's long)
  - Scratching your head.
  - Playing with the cutlery and the salt cellars if you are speaking at a dinner table

Any of them will distract the audience's attention from what you are saying, and detract from your message.

### **Gesture**

This is a vital component of a successful speech. While there are some people who can deliver a successful presentation without gesture they are merely the exception that proves the rule.

Very few people remain completely motionless while speaking and even fewer can do it without losing the audience's interest.

The skilled speaker can judge the movement required for a particular speech. The amount of gesture does vary according to the type of speech.

For example, presenting an After Dinner Speech about a personal experience will most likely be more animated than putting a proposal for extra funding before the Board.

There is only one really effective way to improve the gestures used by a speaker and that is by feedback.

This feedback can be provided by advice from a Coach and/or by watching a replay by video. By playing the video on fast forward repetitive gestures are accentuated.

A speaker must guard against rehearsed contrived movements. These tend to be very distracting and hence your message is partially lost.

Practise is necessary to promote the movements that will automatically reinforce the speaker's message.

## **Breathing**

These exercises are designed to teach diaphragm breathing, which is very important for voice control and voice projection.

They are from adaptations of exercises from theory notes and draw on four years experience with singing lessons.

### **Exercise No. 1**

This exercise is for developing the ability to diaphragm breathe, a necessity for breath control in singing or voice projection.

- Place hands on the diaphragm.
- Breathe in deeply and slowly
- Notice your hands rising as your diaphragm fills
- Breathe until diaphragm feels full/firm under your hand
- Don't lift your shoulders or allow chest to swell out
- Practice this to familiarize yourself with diaphragm breathing

### **Exercise No. 2**

This exercise is for increasing capacity and control of breath.

- Breathe in deeply and correctly (see No. 1)
- Breathing out, count aloud to as many as possible in one breath
- Keep counting at a steady pace, no need to rush
- Only count until breath is expelled to a comfortable level - it is not necessary to overly deflate lungs
- Keep counting fluent - no pauses between counts
- Be aware of using just one breath - sometimes it is automatic to take mini-breaths between counts which undermines breath control.
- Remember the highest number reached on first attempt and work towards increasing this through practice.