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The nonverbal ways leaders unintentionally self-sabotage their communication

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Nonverbal cues are just as expressive as verbal ones.

JACOB WACKERHAUSEN—GETTY IMAGES

What you say matters. What you don't say might matter even more.

Do you tend to slouch in your chair, fail to maintain eye contact, or wear all of your emotions on your face? Being mindful of these actions can help leaders

better connect with their staff and avoid sabotaging their ability to win over their team.

“Everything that you do as a leader is symbolic,” says Willie Pietersen, a professor of professional practice at Columbia Business School and author of the soon-to-be-released book *Leadership—The Inside Story*. Seemingly small actions, such as walking into the office with a smile and a “spring in your step,” he says, can affect a team’s mood.

Serving in a leadership role comes with a slew of challenges and demands for one’s attention. While it’s natural to feel disappointed or frustrated when confronted with related obstacles, minute facial expressions such as eye-rolling, scowling, or plain disinterest can leave employees feeling disheartened and, if relaying bad news, discourage them from coming forward in the future.

John Mattone, founder of the executive coaching firm John Mattone Global, has spent years advising various CEOs on becoming stronger leaders. While shadowing a CEO at a recent board meeting, Mattone noticed that everyone was slouching.

“That’s not a display of power and influence,” he says. Leaning back with arms crossed is often perceived as a sign of boredom or distancing oneself, whereas leaning forward shows that one is engaged and commands attention.

Pietersen says he’s observed similar nonverbal behaviors that have sabotaged a potential hire’s career prospects. While president of Seagram USA, he asked two job candidates vying for a director of financial planning role why they wanted the position. One candidate leaned back and folded her arms to answer the question, while the other leaned forward eagerly to explain. He hired candidate two.

Holding appropriate eye contact is another important aspect of nonverbal communication, Mattone says.

“You have to establish that there’s a connection, and there is a deep want and desire to impact the recipient, whether it’s one person or multiple,” he says. Often, when presenting, executives only focus on one or two people when they should instead capture the room by looking at everyone.

Pietersen recalls visiting the office of a family-run alcoholic beverage company, where he served as an advisor for many years. The CEO made a point to chat with everyone who came across their path.

While the CEO used verbal communication in speaking to his staff, the nonverbal aspect was giving employees his time and, in so doing, demonstrating that he valued what they had to say.

“The task of a leader is to get ordinary people to do extraordinary things. You can’t ask them to do extraordinary things; you have to inspire them in ways that are both verbal and nonverbal,” Pietersen says.