

Is Your Body Betraying You In Job Interviews?

Scott Reeves, 02.16.06, 6:00 AM ET

On paper, the applicant looked like a strong candidate for chief financial officer: graduate of a top business school, solid work history and top-notch references. But at the initial interview with a major Midwestern headhunter, the candidate offered a dead-fish handshake, slouched and fidgeted in his chair, failed to make eye contact with the interviewer and mumbled responses to basic questions.

Was he unprepared for the interview or just nervous because so much was on the line? It made no difference--his weak body language killed his chances despite strong credentials.

"It was a horrifying encounter," says **Scott W. Simmons**, vice president at Crist Associates, an executive-search firm in Chicago. "He wasn't a presentable candidate and didn't make it to the next round. He had a strong background, but after the interview, I'm not sure how he made it as far up the corporate ladder as he did. I just couldn't see him as a CFO, the position we were seeking to fill."

Get seven tips on job interviewing body language.

A strong cover letter and resume will get you an interview for that dream job, but you can easily kill your chances with weak body language. Presentation sets you apart from other applicants in a competitive situation (see: "[Dressing For The Job](#)"). Remember, if you got the interview, the prospective employer thinks you can do the job. The interview is your opportunity to convince the employer that you're the best candidate (see: "[Hitting A Job Interview Home Run](#)").

Many people polish their verbal skills for an interview, but few give much consideration to their body language, and that's a mistake (see: "[Catastrophic Job Hunting Flubs](#)").

"When you walk into a job interview, the first impression is made in three to seven seconds," says **Mary Dawn Arden**, an executive coach and president of Arden Associates in New York. "One study found that a first impression is based on 7% spoken words, 38% tone of voice and 55% body language."

A bad first impression is difficult to overcome, no matter how solid your credentials. But with a little work and practice, you can buff up your body language skills to boost your chances of nailing the interview and taking the next big step in your career.

To see and hear yourself as others see and hear you, Arden recommends practicing your presentation in front of a mirror while speaking into a tape recorder.

"No one can fault you for being too formal in an interview," Arden says. "But being sloppy, or even too casual, will kill your prospects."

Pay attention to little things, like posture, sitting up straight, planting your feet squarely on the floor, hand position and making eye contact with the interviewer.

There's no dictionary for body language, and it's impossible to say this or that gesture means X, Y or Z. But in general, here's how some basic body language will be perceived:

- Arms folded across your chest is often seen as a defensive posture or, at best, as reserved and uninterested in the conversation.
- Standing with your hands in your pockets suggests a lack of confidence or unease.
- Sitting with legs crossed while shaking one leg or wiggling a foot suggests nervousness or severe discomfort.
- Staring blankly at the floor suggests a profound lack of interest in the conversation.
- Rubbing or touching your nose during a response suggests that you're not being completely honest.
- Rubbing the back of your head or neck suggests you're bored by the conversation.
- Pointing your feet toward the door or leaning in that direction suggests that you want to end the conversation quickly and flee--

perhaps in a panic.

-- Slouching in the chair suggests you're unprepared for the interview, or that, deep in your heart, you know you're not up to the task.

None of this is carved in granite--you may rub your nose simply because it itches. But simple actions may betray your inner thoughts. You don't want to test how these seemingly innocuous actions will be interpreted in an interview, so it's best to avoid them.

"You want to project confidence--not arrogance," Arden says. "Arrogance is the antithesis of confidence and shows a profound lack of self-confidence."

At the interview, always grasp the interviewer's hand firmly and look him straight in the eye when introduced. Thank the interviewer for taking the time to talk. Never sit down before the interviewer, and don't throw yourself in the chair like a teenager preparing to sink into a vegetative state in front of the TV.

In most cases, there will be a desk or a table between you and the interviewer that will establish a safe "personal space." If not, don't get too close--18 inches is about the lower limit, and two or three feet will be more comfortable for most people.

When responding to a question, speak directly to the person who asked it. If there are several people at the interview, glance briefly at them, but always return to the questioner before ending your response.

No one expects you to sit ramrod straight, but you need to sit up to project an image of alertness and interest in the interview.

"Use hand gestures for emphasis," Arden says. "You're not a cheerleader, and you don't want to fidget unconsciously. This is why it's important to practice before a mirror."

Reflect the interviewer's body language, but don't mimic it. Underscore your seriousness, interest and confidence by making eye contact, cocking your head to catch questions and smiling. But don't follow the interviewer's every twitch, jiggle and jump with a twitch, jiggle and jump of your own, because that quickly degenerates into self-parody, and what you hope to project as earnestness becomes twaddle.

If the interviewer leans back in his chair, clasps his hands behind his head and smiles, that's probably a look of condescension. If he's drumming his fingers on the desk, he's probably bored.

If the interview is interrupted by a phone call, busy yourself with papers in your briefcase and restart the discussion by asking something like, "Do you agree with the way I handled the billing situation?" or simply, "To get back to your question...." This will refocus the conversation and flatter the interviewer by asking for an opinion, while restarting the conversation without a hitch.

Most interviewers hold all calls when meeting with applicants, but a few ask the secretary to call simply to see how you'll handle the interruption. If the interviewer takes a phone call, don't get angry. Motion to the interviewer that you're willing to leave if the call is important. If the interviewer shakes his head no, busy yourself with personal papers to create a sense of privacy.

These basic techniques will work for privately held companies and major corporations, such as **Exxon Mobil** (nyse: [XOM](#) - news - people), **Microsoft** (nasdaq: [MSFT](#) - news - people), **Intel** (nasdaq: [INTC](#) - news - people), **Wells Fargo** (nyse: [WFC](#) - news - people) and **JetBlue** (nasdaq: [JBLU](#) - news - people).

Finally, keep your comments on a professional level. Can the jargon and computer analogies, and don't sound like a junior high school kid who's just discovered naughty words.

"I had another candidate who dropped 'f-bombs' and other swear words left and right during an interview," Simmons said. "He was in his mid-40s and had served as a chief operating officer for a financial-services company, so he should have known better. His language made no sense and killed his chances."

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