



MELROSE



**BODY LANGUAGE  
AT WORK**

**Desmond Morris**

for sales people

# BODY LANGUAGE AT WORK

FOR SALESPeOPLE

**Programme Guide**

Produced by

**MELROSE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Salespeople are among those for whom an understanding of body language is vital for success in their jobs.

As most customers prefer to buy from people they like, it is essential that salespeople realise the importance of building a rapport from the outset. This means that good communication and interpersonal skills, including an understanding of body language, are critical.

In this programme in the Body language at work series Desmond Morris examines the role of body language in selling. He demonstrates how an understanding of body language will give salespeople an awareness of the impression they are making with their own gestures and expressions, and help them to interpret the signals being given out by the prospective customer or client.

## **VIDEO ANALYSIS**

### **SALES MEETING**

The salesperson shows respect to her prospective customer by sitting on the edge of her seat, making good eye contact and giving him her full attention. She tries to make him feel important by listening carefully and nodding agreement. Considering the lack of interest he is betraying with his own body language, it is probable that a less experienced and accomplished salesperson would have lost control of the meeting.

When the buyer is distracted by the phone call, the salesperson keeps calm and takes the opportunity to move her chair a little closer so that when he returns she can lean in and, using postural echo, reflect his body posture. This shows, done with some subtlety, that like bodies equate with like minds.

She knows he is very pressed for time but rather than panicking into a conclusion she deals with the rest of the meeting in a very controlled way and makes sure her authority and professionalism come through, culminating in the handshake at the end.

### **EXHIBITION**

The first salesman at the exhibition gets everything wrong. He is literally pushy, invading the buyer's space, even to the extent of putting his hand momentarily on her shoulder which is a clear breach of selling etiquette. He is slightly flirtatious which goes down very badly. At the end the buyer can't wait to get away.

The second salesman watches the buyer discreetly but ready to offer help the moment he senses he is needed. He approaches her but doesn't come too close, electing to stand

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half turned away so he doesn't confront her. He makes good use of postural echo, mirroring her hand gestures, and when they move to the desk he uses a guiding hand politely to show the way.

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

Sadly, many sales are lost in the first few minutes of the salesperson meeting the potential buyer. This has nothing to do with the quality or price of the goods or services on offer. It is usually because the salesperson does not come across as the type of person, either in terms of dress or behaviour, the customer would choose to buy from.

How salespeople dress is important. The clothes need to reflect both the selling organisation and the individual who wears them. Some organisations have a virtual uniform for their salespeople and in many retail situations this is normal. This is fine but tends to hide the personality of the wearer.

Salespeople can make their own mark by choosing a particular hair style or jewellery that indicates their own character, as long as it is in keeping with overall company policy. No salesperson wants to appear either too flamboyant or too mousey.

The style with which a salesperson walks and conducts himself or herself is also important. Most people today are not impressed by the old idea of the stereotypical salesman with the flashy car and watch who presumes he is going to close the sale in the first meeting. The important thing for a salesperson is to come across as someone the buyer wants to do business with.

Equipment and visual aids can also play a part. Presentation folders must look good and clean. Any samples or brochures must be handled efficiently and with care showing they represent something of value that is worth buying.

## **SALES MEETINGS**

When two people meet for business purposes one will always be dominant over the other. In the case of a sales meeting it is important for the prospective buyer to feel dominant over the salesperson. At the same time it is essential for the salesperson to be in control of the meeting even though he or she appears to have the subordinate role. This will greatly enhance the salesperson's chance of achieving a successful outcome.

The salesperson should not appear to be pushy but on the other hand should never grovel. It should seem to be a meeting of almost equals, allowing the buyer to feel slightly superior. The buyer will usually feel most comfortable with a salesperson who is demonstrably confident and authoritative about the product or service.

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## THE GREETING

Be ready to greet the buyer. It is always better to be standing waiting than slumped in a low armchair from which you have to arise in as dignified a way as possible. Let the buyer make the final step to approach you so that he or she sets the distance and you don't invade their personal space. Shake hands in the conventional way (no extra hands on top) looking the buyer in the eye with a pleasant expression.

A warm friendly greeting will get you off to a good start.

## DEALING WITH BARRIERS

A buyer's office is their territory; usually the more senior the person the larger and more impressive is the office. They may want to show their status by sitting behind a large desk, which presents problems for the salesperson as it is always harder to sell across a barrier.

Try to remove any barrier between you. With some buyers this is not easy and it may be necessary for you to wait until the opportunity arrives to show a product or brochure. At this point you may be able to invite the buyer to sit alongside you at a smaller table in the room.



## USING SPACE

Remember that the space around us is our personal space and generally we do not allow people to come too close. When you greet someone it is a good idea to stand at arm's length which should not offend anyone. If they want to move closer they can. In the same way do not sit too close to the buyer, unless invited.

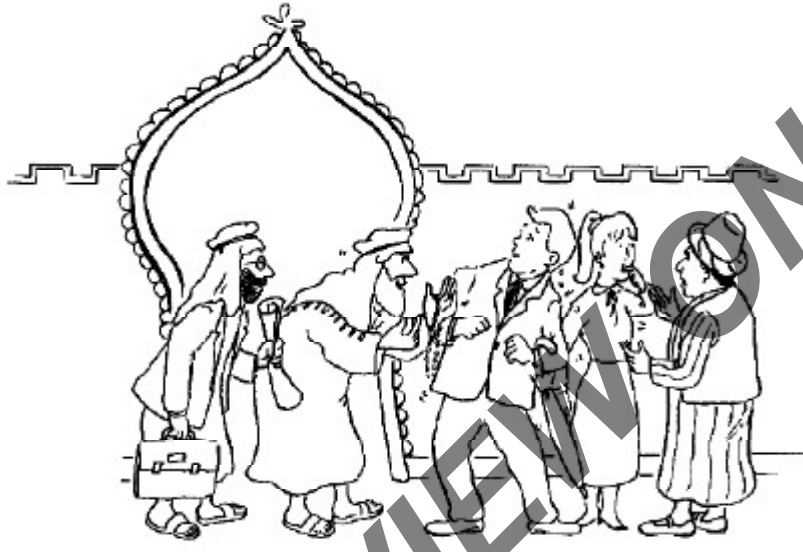
As the relationship between you grows and you want to share information then you can move closer, although it is always sensible to ask first if you may. This is especially important when a man is selling to a woman: it is wise to ask, verbally or with a gesture, if he can move closer to show a brochure or a sample.

If you are invited to move closer in this way it can be read as a sign that so far the meeting is on course.

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## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Accepted use of space and territory varies according to country and culture. If you are selling abroad you need to be sensitive to other people's expectations. In the UK we tend to keep a respectable distance of an arm's length for business dealings. However, in the Arab countries, for example, they tend to come much closer which makes many Western people feel very uncomfortable. Also in the UK we tend not to touch one another in business encounters whereas in European countries they are much more likely to touch and embrace.



These differences in approach and convention are just as difficult for the demonstrative nations who feel spurned when their embraces are not reciprocated as for the reserved nations who feel invaded by the unaccustomed physical proximity. An awareness of these issues will be a great help in any international business dealings.

## WATCHING FOR SIGNS

During the sales presentation a salesperson must not only be aware of the impression they are making with their own body language but also watch out for signals from the buyer. You must know how to build on signals of interest and deal positively with any signs of uninterest.

The ideal situation has the buyer giving their rapt attention to the salesperson, good eye contact with the salesperson or on the brochure or sample, and showing they are listening intently perhaps with head slightly inclined. This means you can proceed as things are going well.

If the buyer is looking round the room restlessly, it may be their attention is elsewhere or something specific is bothering them. If they fiddle with a watchstrap or sleeve, again their attention is wandering or perhaps you are talking too much and should ask them a question or their opinion.



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When the buyer talks, look for matching or discrepancy between words and body language. If, for example, they are saying something positive and encouraging but at the same time they are touching their face or mouth or shifting their body awkwardly, you may be advised to check they are sure or even suggest they seem a bit uneasy. It may be there is something quite insignificant which is, nevertheless, bothering them or something of real importance which needs to be cleared up.

If the buyer seems reluctant to accept your proposition, you can always try to gain their trust and sympathy by using postural echo to show you really do understand their position. This can also be used should the occasion arise of the buyer becoming angry. It is a very useful technique to defuse any awkward situation and something you can do without interrupting the buyer's flow.

Another way the salesperson can use body language when the buyer is talking is to give encouraging nods and maintain eye contact to show you are in agreement and to lean in towards them to demonstrate your intense interest in what they are saying. This is a very effective way of communicating without saying a word and letting the buyer feel as if they have the floor.

If the buyer makes very obvious signals such as looking at their watch, the clock or their diary or making an intention gesture such as putting their hands on the arms of the chair ready to rise, you should take the hint that it is time to draw to a close.

If, however, things are going well, you should be looking for buying signals. Often these may be verbal but body language plays a part too. The very obvious one (which no salesperson sees often enough!) is picking up a pen as if ready to sign an order. More often it will be signs such as looking thoughtful and nodding slightly as if thinking things over which should prompt the salesperson into going for the close.

## **EXHIBITIONS AND RETAIL**

Those who sell to the public at exhibitions, in stores and showrooms can use most of the techniques described for face-to-face selling.

One of the great **differences in these situations**, however, is that whereas the organisational buyer in his office has usually agreed to a meeting because he wants or needs to talk about a specific requirement, in these more public places the buyer's needs are not so well defined.

In many cases the customers may simply be browsing, looking to see if there is anything that interests them, and have chosen to go to a store or exhibition anonymously because they are not yet ready to buy. It is up to the salesperson to judge the right approach.

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## **REMOVING THE BARRIER**

It is inadvisable to stand guard by the entrance of your exhibition stand or at the door of a shop lest you appear to be the collector at the toll gate - to pass is going to cost money.

It is better to keep back from the entrance and, if someone is looking in, welcome them with a nod of the head and a smile and perhaps a “good morning”. Let them come in and look around rather than moving towards them.

## **WHEN TO APPROACH**

If a salesperson approaches a browser too soon the customer will be startled and react negatively. Equally if the browser wants help and the salesperson doesn't realise this, the browser may become fed up and leave unimpressed.

In these situations watch for the signs that the customer wants some assistance. It may be just a look or glance in your direction or a small hand movement such as a slight reaching out to you. Don't watch their every move: just glance up now and again to see if you are needed.

When you see them looking intently at something, comparing one item with another or running their fingers over an item, they are showing interest signals.

In clothing shops the act of holding a garment up against them as they look in a mirror becomes a buying signal when they return to the same item again.

Someone who looks quite rapidly and impatiently all over the shop or exhibition stand may be trying to find a specific item. It is wise to offer them assistance promptly, otherwise they may lose patience completely and leave. This sort of person may have a far more abrupt style of body language than the browser.

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## HOW TO APPROACH

When the salesperson judges the customer is interested, the right procedure is to approach, keeping a good arm's length distance and, without confronting the person, ask an open question about the item. (Asking a closed question merely invites a negative answer.)



Lead a customer to a display or to a counter with a soft baton gesture, allowing the customer to overtake you if possible. This helps to make the customer feel both important & cared for.

## JUDGING THE CUSTOMER'S RESPONSE

When the salesperson explains the product or service, the buyer may say they don't like something or that it is unsuitable. However, their body language, especially their eyes, may well indicate that they do like it. The salesperson needs to find out the reason for the discrepancy between words and body language, especially since body language often expresses the real feeling.

The same is true in reverse. In a clothes store a customer may say they like a garment but clearly, from the negative body language, there is something not quite right about it. The salesperson should probe in order to address what is wrong and see if something more suitable can be found. In this situation the worst thing would be for the customer to go away having bought an unsuitable or unwanted garment. The fact is that if the customer is happy with a purchase they will return to buy again. If they feel unhappy or manipulated into making the wrong purchasing decision, they will always give the shop a wide berth in future. By making eye contact, watching their distance and using positive head gestures, the salesperson should be able to guide and lead the customer to a buying decision.

## SUMMARY

In all selling situations the personal relationship between buyer and salesperson is important. It may only be a very brief relationship but nevertheless it must be a real one based on empathy and trust. The successful salesperson will be aware of this and will be able to put their understanding of body language to subtle and effective use.



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## INTRODUCTION

A large part of a manager's job depends upon good communication skills. Some of this may be written communication in reports, letters and memos, but a great deal of it is face-to-face. Whether in meetings with customers or suppliers, in informal encounters with colleagues or subordinates, or in formal presentations a manager's communication skills, in which body language plays an integral part, are subject to scrutiny on a daily basis.

In this programme in the Body language at work series Desmond Morris looks at the role of body language in communication for managers and shows how an understanding of the subject can make managers more effective in their dealings with colleagues, customers and suppliers.

## VIDEO ANALYSIS

### STATUS

Everyone in an organisation knows who the managers are and takes their status for granted. This means that on the whole the managers themselves don't have to emphasise their dominance. They can even play against it and use a subordinate pattern of behaviour which makes them appear to be inferior to what people may expect of them. This should have the effect of making them seem very reassuring and friendly and therefore much more approachable to their staff. In many cases this will pay dividends in terms of a motivated and productive workforce.

### PRESENTATION

In a presentation a manager dominates the proceedings but also has a subordinate role in terms of being there to serve the audience. This means the manager has to appear authoritative but not removed or superior in a pejorative sense.

In this case the manager makes good eye contact with her audience and maintains a cheerful and enthusiastic composure. Her words are reinforced by her body language. She comes out from behind the barrier of the desk as soon as possible in order to engage more directly with the audience.

Keeping watch on the audience she is quick to notice any signs of resistance and then moves towards the individual to sort out the problem. She gives him and his problem her full attention and then addresses her answer to him, but shared with the rest of the audience.

### MEETING

In the first example of the staff meeting an unpleasant confrontational atmosphere takes hold very quickly. The manager is sitting in a status position at the head of the table and he gives a hard aggressive stare to the man who challenges him. He folds his arms, appearing very



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defensive and then stands up to emphasise his superiority. All this alienates the others at the table.

Compare this to the second example where the manager uses the same words but backed up by very different body language. To begin with he is sitting at a round table as one of the group. His body posture is friendly and he makes good eye contact with all the group in turn. In no way does he emphasise his dominant position in the organisation or the group. He uses reassuring open gestures such as the hand extended, reaching out to the other man in the form of a minimal embrace.

## **INTERVIEW**

The interviewer is making every effort to come across to the interviewee as friendly and non-threatening, and he responds accordingly, answering her questions in a relaxed way. However, when the moment comes for her to ask a difficult question on a sensitive issue, his body language changes completely. He crosses his legs, folds his arms, shrinking his body into the chair, and looks very ill at ease and defensive.

To counter this reaction and to find out the cause of it, the manager needs to get him to relax again. She leans towards him, smiles encouragingly and opens her hands as she speaks. When he speaks she nods to reassure him and to show she is listening intently. By clustering these gestures together, the impression she gives is of lessening her dominance of the situation. By making herself seem a little more inferior than she really is, she allows him to unwind, regain his confidence and provide her with the explanation for his unease.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF BODY LANGUAGE**

By dint of their position managers have power and authority. Given their natural superiority, therefore, it should be unnecessary for the majority of them to go around using postures and gestures which signify their own importance. Used crudely and carelessly these will serve to alienate colleagues and subordinates rather than to impress them. Most managers will find that friendly and even subservient body language will provoke a much more positive response from the other people at work.

“Management style” is a term that is frequently discussed on management training courses. Whatever style is adopted by a manager he or she will need to think carefully about how their body language helps or hinders them in dealing with other people.

## **UNDERSTANDING BODY LANGUAGE**

Most people, including managers, want to be both respected and liked. The impression that a manager gives through body language can be a great help in establishing a good rapport with others.

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However, one of the last people to know about the real reactions of staff to their manager is the manager himself or herself. People are aware that their positions and prospects are in the hands of the manager and so they are usually careful not to say what they may really think. But whatever they say will be supplemented by their body language and if the manager can read this he or she will be able to understand what their staff really may be feeling about them and their instructions. Then the manager can adjust or modify their actions and words to achieve a better, and one hopes more harmonious, result.

## **STATUS SYMBOLS**

Managers often have status symbols granted to them by their positions. It may be that they have their own offices or a larger screened section of an open-plan office. They may have special car parking places, use of an executive dining room, personal assistants or secretaries or other signs of their responsibilities (although many of these are disappearing today unless you are in a very senior position). These are known to their staff who may themselves aspire to such privileges. It may be a mistake for a manager not to make use of these status symbols as, certainly in the British culture, it is what is expected of them.

For a manager to forsake these symbols can actually reduce the respect the staff have of that person and certainly other managers may not be too happy if one of their peers does not accept the rewards of office.

Using status symbols is quite different from over-emphasising authority and power. But a manager still needs to be careful that their body language is controlled and not amplifying the natural status symbols that their position holds.

## **DRESS**

Managers need to dress in a style appropriate to their industry and organisation. The uniform of the manager is set by the culture and practice of the organisation and a newly appointed manager needs to observe how the other managers dress.

Staff usually expect managers to be dressed differently, often more formally, as they have more interaction with people outside the organisation, customers, suppliers, opinion formers etc. Whenever they are representing the organisation to outsiders the right level of dress is expected. During the working day managers can soften their status by, for example, leaving off a jacket, and thus demonstrate that they are also a hands-on member of their team. This sort of subordinate gesture may encourage staff to look more favourably on difficult tasks or accept tough deadlines, if they can see obvious signs of the manager's involvement and commitment.

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## **PRESENTATIONS**

Managers often have to present to a group. It may be good news or routine information which is quite straightforward and has no great emotional impact. But it may also be information that the audience may not want to hear or has strong views on.

A vast amount of literature has been written on the subject of presentation skills covering everything from preparation, content, visual aids and room layout. Here we concentrate on the contribution body language can make to a presentation.

### **THE PRESENTER**

It is very important to be aware of your own body language and the effect it has on the audience.

The first thing to think about is how you dress. You must dress appropriately for the occasion. You don't want to overstate your status nor appear to have not bothered about your appearance. Consider whether you need to look authoritative or not. And consider whether there are any practical elements you need to deal with such as walking up steep steps to a raised dais which might make a female presenter think twice about her clothes and shoes. Think about any jewellery or adornments which might be distracting to the audience.

Try to look enthusiastic and energetic about your presentation, even if it is a routine technical matter. (Of course you may need to temper your enthusiasm if you are dealing with something like large scale redundancy or other bad news.) Always stand up straight and present yourself to your audience with an open posture.

Make sure you maintain good eye contact, scanning the audience as you talk, so that even if you do not look at every individual it seems as if there is every chance you will at some point.

When dealing with an issue which affects a particular individual or section of the audience look towards that part of the audience and address the issue specifically to them. You can, as you do so, spread your hands out with palms up to encourage a positive reaction.



Before the presentation think carefully about the positioning of a desk or lectern (beware: the latter always looks very formal and therefore to some degree alienating for the audience) and any equipment such as an overhead projector. You don't want to be hidden or masked permanently. You should come out from behind any barrier at every opportunity especially when you need to address sensitive or personal issues and want to convince the audience to accept your proposition.

Use your hands to signal the importance of an issue, to point a forward direction, to encourage people to join with you in a new venture. The positive use of body language reinforces the verbal messages you are giving. But you want to exercise some restraint lest your positive gestures become wild gesticulations and undermine the content of your presentation.

### **READING THE AUDIENCE**

As you speak you should watch your audience to gauge their reactions. Their body language will indicate broadly their response.

In fact before you start speaking you may notice some of your audience already showing signs of resistance or lack of interest. You can tell this from the way people are sitting. If they are sitting back with arms folded (especially if they are in a group) it may be they are going to be negative or even hostile to your presentation.

There are a number of ways of dealing with this. You can speak directly at the dissenting group and, using the technique of postural echo, fold your arms. This should result in at least some of them unfolding their arms and beginning to pay attention to what you have to say.

You can also make direct reference to them and their lack of interest and, reinforcing your words with encouraging gestures and facial expressions, you can appeal to them to

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reconsider.

You may see someone looking uncomfortable and giving negative body language signals - looking around, touching their face, folding their arms. You can try to talk directly to this person, perhaps asking if they agree with a particular point or have some experience to share.

When you ask for questions you may get a question that verbally seems innocuous but the body language may be hostile, for example, leaning forwards, baton gestures. As you answer move towards the person and mimic, in reduced form, the baton signals. This can help diffuse the situation. You can also try the gesture of imploring to others in the audience to get them to support you in your response to the question.

## **MEETINGS**

Most managers spend a great deal of their time (many would say far too much time!) in meetings with colleagues, superiors and subordinates.

Whether chairing or simply attending a meeting, managers should understand the role of body language in this situation. An awareness of their own body language together with an understanding of others' will give them an advantage in any meeting. It can be instructive just to watch the body language of people at meetings and observe those who are not interested, those who don't want to get involved, those who are hostile to the proposals, those who are trying to impress and those who want to dominate the meeting.

When chairing a meeting a manager must consider seating arrangements. To sit at the head of the table can be read as a sign of status, while to sit on the long side of a table can indicate a preference to be viewed as an equal. The use of a round table can show a desire for equality for everyone. Probably the most important thing from a practical point of view is to sit where you can see everyone.

Generally people sit down at meetings unless someone stands to demonstrate something or is carried away by their argument or their anger. Usually it is a sign, however unconscious, they are trying to dominate the proceedings and demonstrate their superiority. In an argument this might be followed by another person standing up to present their heartfelt opposing view.

In such a case the person running the meeting must defuse the situation. If it's only one person standing, using postural echo he or she can stand up too and then take the lead in sitting down again. If it's two people it might be better simply to ask to ask them to sit or you might run the risk of the whole meeting rising to their feet.

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Many people at meetings feel inhibited from contributing. A good chairperson will spot the person who reveals through their body language that they have something to contribute but are reluctant to participate. It may be they lean in and then back again or look as if they are about to open their mouth and then think better of it. They may even purse their lips or touch their mouth. This person may only need a word or nod of encouragement to prompt them to start.

A good chairperson will actively encourage everyone to have their say by presenting an open and reassuring posture to the meeting. By using their hands in a diminished form of the embrace they can welcome everyone and their contributions. If imparting bad or controversial news they can use an open imploring gesture with palms up to persuade people to accept what they are saying. The most negative body language would be to stand, thus overtly presiding over the meeting, with a folder as a barrier discouraging others from contributing.



Other negative body language found in meetings usually indicates hostility or rejection. Someone sitting back in their chair in an upright stance with arms folded probably signifies trouble, even if the words they utter are in agreement. If they are using baton signals with their hands or fingers, the strength of the baton action gives some indication of the strength of their feeling.

The other main source of body language in meetings is often impatience or boredom. If people are shuffling papers, doodling, looking round the room or out of the window or gazing into the middle distance, the likelihood is their minds are not on the subject of the meeting. It may mean the subject has been discussed enough or that the subject has little or nothing to do with them. On the other hand it may affect them in which case the chairperson should find out the reason for their behaviour.

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It is always best for the person in the chair to impress and manipulate the meeting with their interpersonal skills, including their understanding of body language, rather than by merely forcing an issue by dint of their superior position. This may succeed in the short term but it will never have the full commitment of those involved.

## **INTERVIEWS**

Managers have to carry out interviews for recruitment and selection, appraisal and performance review, and sometimes for grievance and discipline.

Body language is a vital part of interviewing technique from the manager's point of view. Not only must the manager be able to read the body language of the interviewee but must also be aware of the effect of the body language that he or she is having.

A successful interview is when, regardless of the outcome, both parties feel they were able to communicate well with the other person. The person in control of the interview, in this case the manager, has the responsibility of making the interview work. If the manager is insensitive to the body language of the person they are interviewing and if they are not aware of the impression they are making the interview will probably fail.

## **THE INTERVIEWEE**

Anyone being interviewed either formally or informally by a manager who is senior to them will feel some nervousness or sense of inferiority. If the interview is with a stranger for a job, some people will feel even more nervous as there is more at stake. The interviewee may try to cover their nervousness in an attempt to appear more confident.

A good manager will want to help the interviewee to be less nervous as nervous people do not show their best at interviews. He or she must therefore be able first to spot the tell-tale signs of nerves and then to put the person at their ease.

The body language signs of nervousness or lack of confidence may be

- weak or insipid handshake
- sitting uncomfortably and fidgeting
- eyes looking down or around the room
- putting arms across the body as a form of barrier
- fiddling with a watchstrap or bracelet
- hands touching the face.

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At the outset of the interview make the person you are interviewing feel as comfortable as possible. Give them time and space by dealing with non-contentious matters and make sure your body language is friendly and approachable. You need to make good eye contact, smile or show by gesture they are welcome.

Once the person is at ease and talking confidently you need to look for any incongruity between what the person tells you and what their body language is saying. If the two do not match then you need to ask probing questions to uncover the reason for the incongruity.

If when you ask a straight question the interviewee folds their arms and sits back away from you or shows other signs of discomfort or unease it may be they are hiding the truth.



If, as the interview progresses, you note the person opening their hands with palms up then perhaps they want you to accept what they are asking or proposing.

If their hands are held up, however slightly, with palms towards you this may mean they do not accept what you are saying or that they have a different point of view.

If the person is expressing agreement with their words but simultaneously scratching their neck or touching their face it may be that the agreement is not genuine. People often feel they should agree with people who are senior or superior to them.

Again if the words do not match the actions then you need to find out the real feelings of the person.

## THE INTERVIEWER

While it is **vital to be able to understand the signals given** out by the interviewee, it is also important to be aware of the impression you are making. These are some of the points you should consider



- 
- sit at a round table rather than behind a desk
  - play down your status symbols, perhaps interview candidates in a small room that is not your office
  - show you are interested in what the other person has to say by looking at them as they talk
  - use an open friendly posture to appear less dominant
  - encourage the interviewee with nods of the head and open gestures.

If the person is showing signs of nervousness use postural echo - sit in much the same way as them mimicking their movements in a reduced form. This helps the person feel comfortable with you and so should help to put them at their ease and their confidence may grow. Your movements need to be quite small and subtle, not exaggerated in any way.

You can increase the pressure on the interviewee, if you wish, by leaning towards them - invading their personal space a bit - and asking further questions on the matter in hand.

You may not wish to put pressure on the person but rather gently help the person to explain the problem. In this case you can sit back in order to demonstrate that you are not pushing them.

## **SUMMARY**

Body language plays an important part in all management activities which rely on face-to-face communication. In this guide and accompanying video we have looked at situations familiar to all managers and shown how an understanding of body language can help managers deal more effectively with colleagues, subordinates and customers in various contexts.



MELROSE



**BODY LANGUAGE  
AT WORK**

**Desmond Morris**

core programme

# BODY LANGUAGE AT WORK

## CORE PROGRAMME

### Programme Guide

Produced by



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## INTRODUCTION

Today most people appreciate the importance of communication skills in the workplace. It doesn't matter whether you are dealing with colleagues, seniors or subordinates, customers or suppliers, or members of the public, how you interact is critical, both face-to-face and on the telephone.

Body language plays a vital role in all face-to-face communication. So for managers wanting to improve their interpersonal skills with their workgroup or for front line staff in a public sector organisation needing to improve customer service, an understanding of the basic elements of body language and their application in the workplace is essential.

There are two main aspects to body language

- ↳ It can help you put your own message across without any misleading or distracting body language getting in the way
- ↳ It can help you understand what other people are really thinking and feeling.

In this core video and guide Desmond Morris examines the role of body language in communication at work. He provides an introduction to the subject and a commentary to the drama vignettes which illustrate various elements of body language.

In the three other videos in the Body language at work series, he looks at body language in specific situations: in selling, for managers, and for the front line.

It will usually be best to watch the core programme first and to discuss general points on body language before moving on to the appropriate supplementary video on the specific area of interest for the course participants.

Some of the drama vignettes in the core video are repeated in the other videos but the commentary is always specific to the programme.

## USING THE VIDEOS

If you are leading a course or discussion on body language you should watch the video on your own beforehand and note any points of particular interest to your course participants or your organisation.

It may be you are using this material as part of a wider ranging session on communication or managerial skills or customer service. Or it may be you want to concentrate on body language and amplify the session with your own examples, exercises and role plays.

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Desmond Morris provides the commentary to the body language examples in each video. The guide also gives a summary analysis of the video and a fuller explanation of the particular subject area.

You can also use the package as an off-the-shelf distance learning resource. By watching the video and reading this guide to reinforce the learning points, you can absorb a lot of useful information on the subject.

The running times of the videos are as follows

Core programme	21 minutes
For managers	15 minutes
For salespeople	14 minutes
For the front line	14 minutes

### **RUNNING A COURSE**

If you are running a course on body language you may want to start with a general introduction on *What is body language?* (page 8) followed by the video and a recap on the key points (see *Video analysis* page 10). You could then develop the discussion further using the sections *Elements of body language* (page 13) and *Reading the signs* (page 28).

### **WHAT IS BODY LANGUAGE?**

When we talk to each other we use language, that is, spoken words and phrases, and provided we talk in the same verbal language we understand each other. However well we speak in English we will not be understood by a person who only speaks, say, French. One of us must learn the other's language if we are to communicate.

We also use another language: the language that our body "speaks" as we talk. It is the combination of gestures, expressions and movements which forms another type of communication called body language.

Body language exists in all human communication - between mothers and babies from the moment of birth, between parents and children, and between adults in all social situations. In social meetings it is often the body language of others that attracts or repels us and gives a very strong first impression.

One of the features of body language is that most people are quite unconscious of what they are doing with posture and gesture. This means that body language can provide us with clues to the attitude and feelings of the person that may or may not be revealed by their spoken words. If the spoken words and the body language tell the same story we can be confident of the meaning and the messages are clear. If the body language is not in accord with the words

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the message may be confused and it is likely that the body language is nearer the truth.

Body language is also connected to physical situation. Dress can play a major part in body language interpretation along with territory and space in which we live and work. For example, people in positions of power and importance might dress in ways that reinforce their status and inhabit large and impressive offices or buildings. In this context you can understand the trend for “power dressing” in women in the late 1980s as women felt they had to reinforce their own status in business.

An obvious public example of body language can be seen when a politician makes a speech in a confident and positive manner. It is only when asked a probing question that the politician looks uncomfortable, seems smaller, shrinks back and appears defensive. However well he or she now answers the question we are all aware that, perhaps, the truth may be a little obscured. A good interviewer who understands body language would be able to read these signs and press the politician harder to get at the truth.

From our early days we absorb and reflect, within our own culture, the body language of the people around us. This means that body language is not universal and its interpretation can be very different in different cultures. In an increasingly multicultural and international business environment, this can lead to problems. For most of us, much of our work depends on communication and body language plays a major part in communicating effectively. It is therefore essential that we become aware of the signals we are giving out in the workplace and learn to read the signals that are being sent to us, whether from bosses, subordinates, colleagues, clients or customers.

## **VIDEO ANALYSIS**

These are the key points from the core programme.

### **SALES VISIT - MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION**

When meeting a business contact for the first time, the impression you make is crucial. The salesperson here doesn't get off to a very good start. Her body language (sitting down, blowing her nose, fiddling with her bag) shows she is more concerned about herself than she is about taking an interest in her potential client.

The second time she is much more successful. She is standing waiting for him, looking alert and professional. When he approaches they shake hands and by keeping the right distance from him she is careful not to appear too pushy.

During the sales meeting she watches him closely and gives him her full attention. But he doesn't seem very interested. The tell-tale signs of boredom and only sporadic interest are face touching and lack of eye contact. His attention is largely elsewhere.



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To progress the relationship she uses postural echo. She demonstrates her likemindedness by sitting forward in a posture similar to his own.

### **HOTEL RECEPTION - HOW NOT TO MAKE SOMEONE FEEL IMPORTANT**

The young male receptionist is in a difficult situation. He is confronted by a very irate customer but at the same time he has to deal with a telephone inquiry. The big mistake he makes is to allow the telephone to take precedence over the customer in the flesh. The trick is to make both customers, on the phone and in person, feel important. Perhaps he should have put the phone customer on hold or taken the number and phoned back.

As it is he alienates the customer in front of him by using the phone as a barrier or shield from attack, by shifting his eyes and turning away from the counter. He then uses his forefinger to make a small but perfectly clear stabbing gesture. All this gives the customer the clear impression that he is not important and his problem won't be solved.

### **INTERVIEW - WHEN BODY LANGUAGE SAYS MORE THAN YOU DO**

In the interview you can see the moment when the interviewee feels uncomfortable. A penetrating question which touches a nerve causes the man to change his posture completely. He crosses his legs and arms creating a defence against further attack. He touches his ear, which often indicates unease. The sensitive interviewer will know from this that they will have to tread carefully if they want to get the full and true story.

### **SALES EXHIBITION - UNDERSTANDING PERSONAL SPACE**

The salesman is too familiar in his approach to the potential customer. He moves too close, invading her personal space, and completely oversteps the bounds of business decency by touching her shoulder. A more sensitive and restrained approach would have stood a greater chance of success.

### **PRESENTATION - COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE**

In these two examples of presentation skills, the words are the same, the body language is different. In the first example the presenter focuses on the flipchart, has no real eye contact with the audience and stays for the most part safe behind the desk. There is no real communication with the audience and indeed most of them are not paying attention.

In the second example the presenter's words are reinforced by her body language. She maintains eye contact with the audience and is quick to notice any signs amongst them of disagreement. In this way she is communicating properly and encouraging a two-way conversation, making the audience feel involved.

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## ELEMENTS OF BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is signified by expression, gesture and posture. As in spoken and written language where we understand what is said by the collections of words that make up sentences and paragraphs, so in body language it is the combinations of expression, gesture and posture, along with the way we use the space about us, that need to be interpreted.

It is unwise to read too much into a single gesture. For example, it is said that if a person touches their nose while speaking it means they are not telling the truth. Equally it may mean the speaker is suppressing a sneeze or has an itch! You should always look at clusters of gestures in the context of what is being said and where these do not agree then consider what that may indicate. If you are not sure and the messages are confused, ask questions to get clarification.

Body language is not an exact language and needs to be interpreted with care in order to avoid making some unfounded or even foolish judgments.

The three main areas of the body to consider are: face, hands and general body posture.

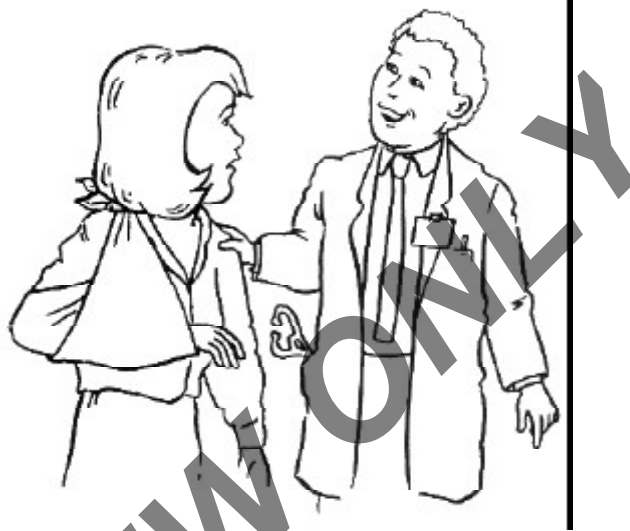
### THE FACE

Key to our visual language are our eyes and how and where we direct them.

- ↳ People who are confident look straight at the person they are talking to. poll
- ↳ A strong hard stare, such as is used by army sergeants can be intimidating. We also stare hard at those with whom we are angry. (Paddington Bear, the well-known children's character, is famous for giving those who upset him a "hard stare".)
- ↳ Looking past or beyond someone may indicate an attitude of superiority or disinterest in the other person. This may lead to the other person feeling that what is being said does not apply to them and they lose interest and pay little attention or, if they are the one speaking, they may feel that the person doesn't regard them as important.



- 
- ↳ When people look down they may be uncomfortable with the situation because they are nervous or unsure of what they are saying. It may also indicate shyness.
  - ↳ Smiling or looking pleased or displeased enables us to communicate without speech. As we listen we can use our faces to show we agree or disagree, to encourage someone to continue or to warn them to stop.



## **HANDS**

Our hands are very expressive of our mood and we use them extensively as we communicate with people. British people may be less expansive with their gestures as compared to, say, French people but generally gesture is a good guide to the full message a person is communicating.

### **Handshake**

The handshake is often the first physical contact we have with another person, especially in business. In western society it is a part of the ritual of greeting, a form of embrace and to avoid shaking hands would be an insult.

The standard handshake where two people just shake hands with equal pressure is of no significance, other than as a sign of conventional politeness.

- ↳ A very weak handshake can be a sign of submissiveness or nervousness. (But beware: royalty and others in important positions, who may have to shake hands frequently, use weak handshakes otherwise they may get tendonitis in their hands!)
- ↳ A strong handshake is a sign of superiority, assertiveness and even aggression. Usually employed by men who feel they need to show their status, it is increasingly used by women who may want to demonstrate that they too have a high status.

- 
- ↴ If one person puts their hand on top of the hands being shaken, that person is extending the embrace to show a closer tie. This may be further extended by touching the arm or even shoulder with the hand. This may be regarded as overfamiliar by recipients, especially in a business situation, but in some cultures this more effusive greeting is common.



#### **Baton signals**

Hands and fingers are used as baton signals to reinforce or amplify what we are saying, by beating time with our words for emphasis.

- ↴ We may chop the air with the whole hand to show we are cutting through a problem.



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↴ Or we may do a form of chopping scissor movement with both hands to show we are rejecting a point. We may do this in a less obvious way when someone else is speaking to signify that we disagree.

↴ Pointing forward with a forefinger can emphasise a particular point. If the finger is pointed at an individual, particularly if the finger is jabbing, it can be a sign of assertion or domination.



↴ A raised forefinger can be a warning of action. It can be in the form of a threat, saying "Look, if you don't stop, I will ....."

#### **Hands and arms**

↴ When arms are held open with palms slightly up it may be a sign that we are imploring someone to accept what we are saying.



↴ With palms down the message is to reduce the importance of an issue and perhaps calm the listener.

↴ Palms held up facing towards the listener is a sign of rejection or of pushing away an idea or request.

- 
- ↳ Palms held towards the speaker is a sign that the speaker wants the listener to embrace an idea.
  - ↳ When one hand is held to the side with the palm vertical the person may be seeking to bridge the gap in a negotiation.



- ↳ A very powerful negative message can be the “hand shrug”. Lifting hands to the side with a slight upward movement with the shoulders. It shows that you are not responsible - it’s no concern of yours.



These actions are mostly used quite unconsciously; for example by people on the telephone using gestures when they know their listener cannot see them.

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The same signals, often in barely discernible movements, may be used by listeners and may be indicating their reaction to what is being said to them.

## POSTURE

The way people hold their bodies is instructive of their mood.

- ↳ In general when a person is sure of himself or herself the posture will be upright. The person will sit or stand tall at a meeting or in an interview.
- ↳ By contrast the person whose posture has slightly crumpled, who has shoulders rounded down and who sits slightly bent is often displaying a submissive or nervous attitude - one that lacks confidence.



- ↳ When we are nervous we may move uncomfortably in our seat, frequently changing the position of our legs, fiddling with our sleeves, watchstrap or handbag.
- ↳ Under pressure we may touch our mouth or nose, smooth our hair or scratch our head. The touching of the mouth, called the “mouth guard”, is to cover up what we are saying.



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↓ We use our arms as a barrier to protect ourselves. We fold our arms across our bodies when we feel our position or opinions are under attack or we want to ward off an investigation of our real feelings.



↓ Other barriers can be made by turning away from another person slightly, by sitting back in a hunched manner and by placing something - such as a notebook, brochure or briefcase - between us and the other person.

## **DRESS**

What we wear at work and at different aspects of our work is a body language signal. In some organisations uniforms are worn at various levels.

In hospitals, for example, different colours and types of uniform are worn by different grades of nurses. This is highly practical as a doctor is prevented from asking a junior nurse to carry out a procedure that he or she is not yet qualified to undertake. The doctors and other specialised professionals wear different uniforms or carry trade symbols such as stethoscopes. Interestingly, in Britain at least, the most senior doctors wear no medical uniforms but are smartly dressed in suits - clearly a status symbol.

In factories, office staff are differentiated from shop floor staff as they do not wear overalls perhaps symbolising a higher status. On the shop floor itself supervisors and managers may wear distinctly different overalls from the general workforce.

However, cultural differences may emerge when an organisation sets up a factory in a foreign country. In some Japanese factories in Britain everyone wears the same uniforms to indicate the cooperative approach of Japanese management.

If we can choose what to wear at work it is wise to select a style that fits comfortably with our role. Power dressing may not be appropriate if one wants cooperation. However a scruffy salesperson will be unlikely to impress a customer and may not retain their job for very long.



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## CLUSTERS

This breakdown of the key signals that our bodies make, mostly outside our control, should be treated with considerable care as taken alone any one of them may not have any real significance. The fact that a person touches his nose may only mean he is trying not to sneeze!

Interpreting body language requires that we read the clusters of signals that people use along with the words that they speak. The clusters may be made up of facial expression, the use of hands and posture being adopted.

How body language signals can be interpreted in various situations at work is set out in *Reading the signs* and in the video programmes and guides that accompany this course.

## TERRITORY

Territory has a considerable impact on the non-verbal messages that we give out.

- ↳ A senior person at work will usually have a larger office or working area, or may drive a larger or more expensive car to signify superiority.
- ↳ A dictator or any autocratic personality may have a vast office with impressive furniture and make visitors walk a considerable distance into the room before getting close to them behind the large desk. All this emphasises the power that they have and the barrier between them and “ordinary” people.
- ↳ When bosses or managers emulate this style and use of space they are trying to enhance their own superiority or authority.
- ↳ Further down the organisation’s hierarchy space may also be used to demonstrate authority even if it is only a named parking space.
- ↳ Space barriers are often erected to show superiority. Individuals may have their own small offices separated from other staff. Those who work in open-plan offices may arrange to have glass screens around their desks or arrangements of tall pot plants. Assistants may be placed outside these barriers.
- ↳ If a manager has an office but mostly leaves the door open it may be a sign that they welcome contact as the barrier is partly opened.

## INDIVIDUAL SPACE

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Each of us has ownership of the space immediately around us. This is called our “intimate zone”. We do not like people in general to enter this zone as it is usually reserved for those with whom we have very close relationships.

- ↳ Many people are uncomfortable in crowded places such as trains, buses and lifts and avoid eye contact so that they can dissociate themselves from those pressed against them.
- ↳ At work it is almost always wrong to get closer than about arm’s length to another person in any meeting, and touching, apart from the initial handshake, is usually inappropriate. Of course there are those who have to touch people as part of their jobs, eg medical people, clothing salespeople, hairdressers etc. These people have to learn how to touch people in non-threatening ways.



## **BARRIERS**

In an office the desk is a key piece of furniture. The man or woman who is sitting behind a desk is protected from contact. Their side of the desk is private and few people are permitted to come to their side of the barrier.

- ↳ If one wants to have a cooperative discussion it is often necessary to get the person away from their desk to a round table or to sit side-by-side so that the barrier is removed.
- ↳ At a presentation the lectern is another form of barrier behind which a presenter can hide. The listeners are aware of the barrier and it is often wise for the presenter to come from behind the barrier to show cooperation.
- ↳ Other barriers can be temporary such as a clipboard, an order pad or a brochure. These barriers enable people to protect their personal space when they are on a sales floor, at an exhibition or away from their normal place of work.

## **HANDLING SPACE**

When you are in an interview or at a negotiation you can use space effectively and to your advantage.

- ↳ By leaning in towards a person you can emphasise a point. If you do this with open palms

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you can be encouraging and non-threatening. If you do this with some form of baton gesture you can be threatening or authoritative.

- ↳ Leaning back can allow the other person space to continue and may show acceptance of their proposal. If done without any sign of encouragement it may show disinterest and the increased space is being used as a barrier.

## **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Research has shown that people from different cultures have remarkably different attitudes to space. Country people are used to wider spaces and their intimate zones are greater than town-based people. Urban salespeople who do business in rural areas need to be aware of this.

In some cultures, notably Arab, people tend to stand closer perhaps, it is suggested, due to the smallness of tents in the deserts of their origin. Thus at meetings between western people and Arabs, the Arabs move closer and the westerners move away to the edges of the room. Both sets of people are uncomfortable but may not know why.

As with all the other elements of body language, our use of territory and space is subconscious. We should be aware of how we and the people with whom we are doing business are reacting to our closeness or distance and should make allowances accordingly.

## **READING THE SIGNS**

By watching the core video and by reading this guide you can gain a general understanding of body language as it affects people at work. You should begin to consider how you come across to others as well as what other people are revealing about themselves.

## **WATCHING BODY LANGUAGE IN OTHERS**

By studying the body language of others you can learn more about how people communicate in a non-verbal manner. But remember it is important not to read too much into an isolated gesture or expression. Body language is a subtle and complex form of communication and should always be interpreted with caution.

Rather than look for signs on their own or even in clusters, it might be more fruitful to compare the spoken word with the body language that is being displayed.

Where the two are in harmony, you can be confident you are receiving the full message. Where there is a difference, you need to become more aware and question what is going on.

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In a shop a customer may be telling her companion, perhaps her mother, that she really does like the dress they have selected. The shop assistant may notice that the body language of the daughter is not so positive. As her mother asks her if she really does like the dress and she answers that she does, she may fidget or look away, cross her arms or touch her hair. The shop assistant can perhaps discreetly suggest another dress in a different style and this may lead to two satisfied customers.

In a negotiation one party may agree verbally to a proposition because he feels it is expected of him, but his body language may say the opposite. The other negotiator may want to take

advantage of the situation or, if he is wise, he may ask questions to find out the reason for the discrepancy. A successful negotiation results in both parties being happy.

If when you are explaining something to someone, perhaps a new procedure, you notice that the person is looking away, perhaps touching their mouth or ear or is sitting awkwardly, you should consider why. It may be that you have overcomplicated the instructions, or perhaps it is too simple an explanation and therefore patronising, or the person simply does not want to do the job. Your reaction should be to stop and find out why.

In all routine dealings with people at work it is worth watching their body language. As they speak people may give warning signs that indicate they are under pressure or unhappy. It may be your job to find out what is wrong before it becomes a major problem.

### **USING BODY LANGUAGE YOURSELF**

While a great deal of body language is subconscious you can learn to use non-verbal language positively and also be aware of the impression you are making.

If you hold a senior position in an organisation you do not always have to impress people who already know your position by adopting power status gestures. You do not always have to be behind a desk or at the head of the table. By sitting and standing in positions that show equality with others you can reduce the status pressure that might otherwise be present and create a more relaxed and open atmosphere. People are usually more impressed by a friendly and welcoming personality and by someone who keeps control of a meeting with good eye contact and subtle use of gesture than they are by power games.

If you are supposed to be listening, make sure your body language signifies that the speaker has your full attention and that you are not unconsciously making any distracting gestures which will show the speaker your thoughts are elsewhere.

Always be aware of allowing people their own personal space. Salespeople in particular need to be careful not to get too close or be too familiar with potential customers. The customer

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will feel uncomfortable and will want to get away as quickly as possible.

## **MIRRORING**

When a person is unsure or agitated or angry they subconsciously use body language which reflects this. To show your sympathy and understanding of their plight one technique you can use is “mirroring”, sometimes called “postural echo”. This means you should mimic in a subtle way what they are doing with their posture or gesture. Nothing needs to be said and the action will frequently have the effect of calming the person.

This technique can also be used in situations where the person may not be in distress but you want to make sure that they are on your side or that they know that you’re on theirs. For example in any business or sales meeting it may help the process for the other person to realise that you’re of like minds. It may seem simplistic, but to show the other person you’re of “like body” will suggest subconsciously that you’re on the same wavelength.

In a meeting where different sides are being taken on an issue very often all those on one side will adopt, quite unconsciously, the same posture. If one person wavers towards the other side of the debate he or she may change posture to match that of the other side. A wise chairperson can observe this and choose the moment to call for a vote!

## **BODY LANGUAGE IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS**

In the three videos and guides which accompany this core programme we look at how body language is used in situations which are specific to managers, salespeople and to people on the front line who deal with the public.

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MELROSE



**BODY LANGUAGE  
AT WORK**

**Desmond Morris**

for the front line

# BODY LANGUAGE AT WORK

FOR THE FRONT LINE

**Programme Guide**

Produced by

**MELROSE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Working on the front line for any organisation, whether it is in the public sector such as a hospital or Social Security office or the private sector such as a hotel or airline, demands first class communication skills from the staff involved. In this programme in the Body language at work series, Desmond Morris examines the role of body language in communication with the public and shows how it can enhance the perceived level of customer service in any organisation.

Whereas managers are often dealing with people they know and therefore may have foreknowledge of the type of reactions their colleagues or workgroups are likely to show to news or events, front line staff have often never met the people they are dealing with. They may have to deal with a whole variety of situations: mostly these are only difficult when things go wrong. Consequently it is very useful for them to be able to spot the early body language signs that all is not well and pre-empt anger or other emotional outbursts.

One of the most difficult aspects of working on the front line is coping with the personal attacks from members of the public when you, as representative of the organisation, are only “doing your job”. People often blame you for the constraints or shortcomings of the system you are trying to operate, whether it’s hospital appointments, ticket reservations or, more generally, a computer breakdown. In these situations you need to be able to control your own body language in order to calm the customer and resolve the problem.

## VIDEO ANALYSIS

### GOOD AND BAD LIARS

Nurses and other people in the front line sometimes have to be good liars when dealing with people in distress. Desmond Morris notes the good liars who used appropriate body language to show they are friendly and reassuring, compared with the bad liars who

- used less gesticulation
- used the “hand shrug” gesture to disclaim responsibility
- did a lot of face touching
- showed awkward body postures indicating unease.

### HOTEL RECEPTION

In terms of customer service the young male receptionist has a difficult balancing act, but he fails miserably. He uses the telephone as a barrier to avoid dealing with the man in front of him, thus infuriating the customer. The person on the other end of the phone can’t be too impressed either by what he hears going on!

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You can't play off one customer against another in this way without running the risk of losing both. The receptionist should put the customer on the phone on hold or offer to take a number and ring back. And then he would be free to deal with the customer in front of the counter.

As it is he does everything wrong. He does not smile. He looks down and away from the man. He fiddles with the appointments book. He gives a hand shrug to show the problem is not his. He raises a finger in a warning gesture.

Compare this with the body language of the female receptionist. She gives the man her full attention as soon as she arrives on the scene. She makes direct eye contact and shows she is listening and understanding his problem. She comes out from behind the barrier as soon as she can and leads him with a guiding hand gesture to a seat, showing she is in control of the situation. She uses an open palms gesture to implore him to accept what she is doing for him.

The effect on the man is very noticeable. You can see him start to relax as she cleverly calms him down so she can begin to sort out the problem.

## **AIRPORT**

The passengers are stressed and angry. The mistake made by the airline representative in the first example is that she shows her fear and weakness. She is in the unenviable position of receiving all the flak for something which isn't her fault and over which she has no control. But as the representative of the organisation she has to take the full force of the customers' collective and considerable anger. Her language is fairly direct and positive ("Once we've taken the details of your luggage on this form, we can begin a search and hopefully ..."), but this is undermined by her body language. She avoids all eye contact with the group, shrinking visibly before them and uses her clipboard as a defence against further attack.

In the second scene the representative, using the same kind of language, is more open and friendly. She looks at the group and commands their attention. She maintains an open posture and keeps control of the situation. This way she calms the group and is able to go through the necessary procedures.

## **USING BODY LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC**

Generally speaking you know when someone is angry or distressed by their words and the tone and volume of their voice. The clever thing is to spot the anger or distress brewing and prevent it from rising. The customer or member of the public may sound quite calm and reasonable but, if some emotion is swelling, there may be tell-tale signs. They may be pacing up and down looking for someone to help. Or they may make a revealing jabbing movement with their hands or point aggressively with hand or fingers. All these are signs that warn the front line person to deal with this promptly and pre-empt a potentially ugly scene and one

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that may be damaging to the organisation.

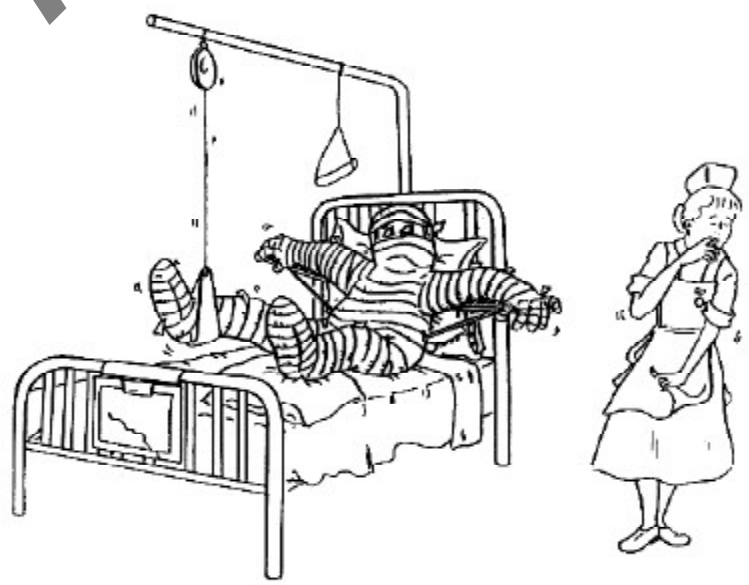
When you are faced with a distressed or angry member of the public, the natural reaction is often to create a barrier between you and them. You can shelter behind your counter or desk or use a clipboard or brochure to protect you. But this is not usually the most constructive way of dealing with the problem, because to the member of the public it signifies that you don't want to help. The most effective solution is to remove the barrier and show by your body language that you are on their side.

Another natural reaction to hostility is to avoid eye contact and turn away. The stewardess was guilty of this in the first airport scene. It destroys confidence and shows a lack of interest.

Gestures also reveal attitudes in this way. In the hotel reception we saw the young man do a hand shrug to the customer, a gesture almost guaranteed to provoke fury in the mildest mannered person. It says quite graphically that it's their problem not yours.

The problem with all these reactions is that they are subconscious, and although the words accompanying them may be polite and reasonable, the actions overshadow and counteract them. The message to the customer is crystal clear: you're not really bothered. What you should always try to do is make the person feel they and their problem or complaint are important, and certainly the most important thing you have to deal with for the moment.

Probably the most effective starting point for dealing with problems or complaints is to look the member of the public straight in the eye, in a helpful not a challenging way, while you listen to what they have to say. If you give them your undivided attention they will believe that you want to help.



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If the person is already angry or very distressed, often the most appropriate action is to try postural echo, that is to mirror their gestures but in a reduced form. This signifies that you understand their point of view and so reduces tension.

On a practical level, it can be helpful to lead the person away from the public eye to a neutral area. A hand gesture pointing the way and walking in front of the person or group will demonstrate that you are in charge and will give them confidence that you can achieve something for them.

It is important when dealing with anger or other emotion you don't simply use the right words. The use of positive and sensitive body language can be very effective in calming people so that you can get the emotion out of the way and then look at the root of the problem.

### **WORKING ACROSS THE COUNTER**

Front line staff who work behind some form of counter in a hotel reception, a ticket office, bank, casualty department or in a government department open to the public often feel that they are "safe" behind the barrier that the counter provides.

At the same time the public often sees the barrier as a way of being denied access.

In some organisations this has been recognised and more open-plan arrangements have been developed to enable closer contact with customers. Hence all the experiments undertaken in banks over the last few years to provide the most customer-friendly environment, removing where possible the need for bank staff to work behind screens and counters.

But in many cases counters remain for practical and safety reasons. In these cases it is vital that the front line staff are aware of how body language can help them overcome the barrier between them and the public and make the public feel welcome and important.

The most important sign you can give a customer is your full attention. Look at the person as he or she approaches and smile encouragingly. As they explain what they want or the problem they have, use hand gestures to encourage and to show you accept what is said. If you show boredom or any lack of interest, despite what you say, the customer will take away a negative view of both you and your organisation.

If you are dealing with people who may be in some kind of difficulty or distress, in a hospital or some other public organisation, you need to look for signs that they may not be telling you all you need to know. Many a patient will say they they have no pain when from their look of anxiety or other signs of distress you are aware that you need to inquire further.

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When a customer or client is about to erupt with anger, they may point at you or your colleagues with a stabbing gesture, chop the air with a hand or fist in time with their words or pace up and down.

In these situations you must not hide behind the counter or use the telephone or booking card as a shield. These barriers indicate, without words, you are trying to avoid the problem. The more you hide and show a defensive body language, such as a hand shrug, the angrier the person will become.



It is also important not to stifle your anger by raising your forefinger or holding up a pen as a warning of action. It is usual for the customer is to make him or

on. Just raising a hand is a sign of aggression or insistence as the effect on the

Your primary aim should be to diffuse the person's anger. You need to stop what you are doing and give the complainant your full attention. Make eye contact, actively listen and then, if appropriate, lead the person to a quiet area. If you can, come out from behind your barrier and guide the person to another room or to an area away from public view.

All the time appear subordinate but do show that you are decisive and in control by standing upright and using your hands to show that you want to help.

If you work in an open-plan room it is sensible to stand up when someone comes in complaining but as quickly as possible indicate the chair to the person and sit down yourself. When people are sitting they find it harder to be angry.

## **DEALING WITH GROUPS**

Front line staff working with groups of the public, such as in tourism or transport, may find their problems are magnified simply by having to deal with a number of people at once.

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In groups there is often a form of herd instinct. If all is going well the herd instinct has a positive effect and the amount of good feeling engendered by and in the group is enhanced. Then a tour operator or a stewardess with good interpersonal skills can build on this with positive body language, using open gestures and guiding hands to encourage and control.

Groups are far more difficult to handle when bad feeling develops. If one person in a group feels let down, this can easily spread throughout the group leaving the front line person to contend with not one but a herd of angry customers whose anger will feed off each other's.

If you are the unfortunate representative on whom a group turns with its complaints you can use body language both to recognise the feelings of a group before negative attitudes are turned into anger and to help you deal with the anger. You can't reason with people who are angry, so you have to calm them first.

A group whose members show negative body language, such as baton gestures, pacing up and down, looking around anxiously, may be close to anger. If you can step in and deal with the issue early on you may be able to prevent any escalation of the problem.

If by the time you are in contact with the group anger has already developed you will need to stay calm and remind yourself that you will be blamed for the problem but that you are not personally responsible. This requires a highly professional approach.

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group and their problems.

If possible, lead the group to a separate area and get them all seated. Use open gestures such as open arms with palms upwards as if imploring them to accept your views. Dealing

with angry groups requires you to appear subordinate, but not weak. Sit down with the group, be assertive but avoid any form of accusatory or aggressive pointing gesture.

Watch for those in the group that seem to accept you and as you explain your course of action look to these people encouragingly. You can use these people as allies to help you convince the others.

### **SUMMARY**

Working on the front line can be very stressful at times. Good communication skills in which an understanding of body language plays a crucial part, can relieve some of that stress by helping front line people to feel more confident and in control when dealing with their customers.

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