

Body Language for Women Who Mean Business *Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D.*

An attractive female executive was having problems dealing with her male co-workers. "They never take me seriously," she complained. "It's as if they think I'm flirting with them. Which I definitely am not!"

After watching her interact with various men, I saw the problem. She was trying to discuss work-related issues while using a "social gaze."

Here's what I mean . . .

If you create an imaginary triangle, the base of which are the eyes and the apex is mid-forehead, you will have mapped out the "look of business." When you keep your gaze in that area, you nonverbally signal a no-nonsense, business-like approach.

When you invert the triangle and move your focus to this area -- from the eyes to the mouth - you turn your gaze into one more appropriate for social encounters. And a social gaze can be misinterpreted as flirtatious -- even in a business setting.

Knowledge about the business gaze doesn't mean that you should never look in someone's social gaze area. (It can be highly effective to do so -- using direct eye contact only when you want to underline important points.) But women need to be aware that to be taken seriously in business interactions, a business gaze has the most impact.

And that's only one of the special issues women face with body language at work. Another has to do with head tilts.

In primitive tribes, tilting the head was a way of hearing more clearly in order to be alerted to sounds of danger. Today, head tilting is a signal that someone is interested and involved -- and a particularly feminine gesture. Head tilts can be very positive cues, but they are also subconsciously processed as submission signals. Women -- in business dealings with men -- should keep their heads straight up in a more neutral position (or should at least be aware of the nonverbal message they are sending when they don't).

Other nonverbal cues to be aware of:

Women who have a firm handshake make a more favorable impression and are more often judged to be confident and assertive. So take the time to cultivate your "professional" handshake. Keep your body squared off to the other person -- facing him or her fully. Make sure you have palm-to-palm contact and that the web of your hand (the skin between your thumb and first finger) touches the web of the other person's. And, most of all, remember to shake hands firmly.

One way that status is demonstrated nonverbally in a business meeting is by physically taking up room. Lower-status, less-confident men (and most women) tend to pull in and keep all of their materials in one neat pile, while high status males take up room. So at your next meeting, spread out your belongings and claim your turf.

More predictably than their male counterparts, women -- when sitting -- adopt an open-arm posture in the presence of someone they like. They also tend to fold their arms across their

chest when they feel indifferent to or dislike the other person. So watch what your arms are "saying." They may give away more than you know.

Clothes make a strong visual statement about how a woman sees herself. And it is here where females really have an edge in dressing for success. Appropriate dress is a way of expressing respect for the situation and the people in it. So, a savvy female's look may change depending on the business circumstances.

Teresa is a management consultant - and a master at dressing for the role. She loves to wear hot pink, turquoise and fire-engine-red silk dresses with stiletto heels and lots of bling to work in her New York City office. But the moment she has to meet with a conservative client, or one who is going through difficult times, Teresa transforms herself into a prim professional whose outfit matches the way she wants to be perceived. (In her words, "The success I dress for is that of my *client*.")

One member of her staff recalls meeting Teresa at the headquarters of a nonprofit religious organization where they were to conduct focus groups. The staff member barely recognized her stylish boss. She looked like one of the nuns! By dressing like the client, Teresa fit right in.

Of course, increased awareness of what you wear and how you shake hands and other nonverbal signals you send is only half of the equation. The other half is the ability to accurately read the body language of others. And it is here where women really have the advantage. Women are more attuned to relationship dynamics and more skilled at picking up nonverbal cues. Isn't it great to know that "women's intuition" has become a very real – and powerful -- professional skill!

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