

An aerial, top-down view of several business professionals in various settings. Some are shaking hands, some are in conversation, and some are looking at their phones. The people are dressed in professional attire like suits and blouses. The central text is framed by a red border.

*The*  
**NONVERBAL**  
**ADVANTAGE**

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Secrets and Science  
of **Body Language**  
at Work

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**CAROL KINSEY GOMAN**

an excerpt from

***The Nonverbal Advantage:  
Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work***

by Carol Kinsey Goman

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# *Contents*

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Five C's of Body Language	11
Chapter 2: Reading the Whole Body	21
Chapter 3: The Eyes Have It	41
Chapter 4: Face to Face	59
Chapter 5: Talking with Your Hands	83
Chapter 6: Feet First	105
Chapter 7: You're in My Space	117
Chapter 8: The Power of Touch	131
Chapter 9: Translating Body Language across Cultures	143
Chapter 10: Selling Your Message without Saying a Word	159
Acknowledgments	183
Index	185
About the Author	201

*The most important thing in communication  
is hearing what isn't said.*

—Peter F. Drucker

# ***Introduction***

## **HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED...**

*What kind of impression am I making?*

*Should I believe what my boss told me?*

*Am I dealing with a potential buyer, or am I just wasting  
my time?*

*Did my whole team understand what I said?*

*What did the customer mean by that?*

*How do I know if he really supports my idea?*

*Is the audience angry, frustrated, interested, or bored?*

The answers to such questions are right before your eyes. That's because people in professional settings are constantly telling each other exactly what they think and feel—and it often has nothing to do with the words they speak. Your boss may say that you'll be considered for a promotion, but if she's leaning back with crossed arms and a forced smile, she's sending the opposite message. The customer may say he's not interested in buying that new car, but if he keeps glancing at the contract on the table, he's telling you that he *is* interested.

The silent signals of nonverbal communication tend to reveal underlying motives and emotions—fear, honesty, joy, indecision, frustration—and much more. The tiniest gestures, like the way your co-workers stand or enter a room, often speak volumes about their confidence, self-worth, and credibility. And the way *you* sit, stand, or look at others reveals more about your true intent than you may realize.

## ***Body Language Expertise***

I've been an expert at using body language from the day I was born. You may be surprised to learn that you have been, too. As infants we displayed a variety of facial expressions to signal our moods and needs, pointed at objects of interest, and bonded with our mothers through the power of eye contact. As children we assimilated those gestures and expressions that were appropriate in our families and in our cultures. Then, as we grew older, we learned to refine (and disguise) signals that were too obvious or unwelcome.

We did most of this unconsciously.

It wasn't until I was in a master's program in college, preparing to be a therapist, that I became aware of the nonverbal signals that I'd been sending and receiving all my life. Training in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Ericksonian approaches to hypnosis and psychotherapy taught me how to observe people's eye movements, facial expressions, and body postures to discover their inner motivation and resistance. When I began consulting to business organizations and speaking to national and then international audiences, I paid more attention to my own body language so that the gestures, postures, and expressions I used would accurately reflect the message I wanted to get across. I use these same insights and techniques with the executives and managers I now coach.

As I began doing research for this book, I learned of the most recent advances in the field. Scientists from evolutionary psychology, neurobiology, medicine, sociology, criminology, anthropology, and communication studies have all brought their methods and concepts to the field of nonverbal communication. The result is a deeper understanding of *how* and *why* body language is so powerful.

## ***Body Language in the Workplace***

A thorough understanding of the role that body language plays in our day-to-day business activities is vital. And yet I see it time and again: executives, managers, and salespeople who aren't reading the clear signals of others or who don't have a clue how their own nonverbal communication is sabotaging their efforts. At a time when it is widely recognized that professional success is achieved with or through other people, the power of, and the need for, good interpersonal skills couldn't be greater. My goal with this book is to help you optimize the power of nonverbal communication in your professional life.



***"I take time to lick the customer's face; I wag my tail when they talk; I jump up and down when they walk through the door. That's what sets me apart from all the other salespeople!"***

On the other hand, those who have mastered these skills—not only to accurately decode the silent signals of others but also to use body language that is aligned with the attitudes they want to project—gain a competitive advantage in business. And that applies to whatever business they are in!

If you are among America's 2.3 million executives, 4.3 million salespeople, 6.8 million waiters, 735,000 lawyers, 567,000 doctors, 212,000 coaches, 842,000 police officers, 3.8 million teachers, 1 million security guards—or everyone else who deals with the public, makes presentations, or negotiates with or manages people—your professional success is tightly linked to your use and knowledge of body language.

The following are just a few examples of that link in action.

**Leadership** The effectiveness of command-and-control management tactics declined dramatically with the end of the Industrial Age. Today's leaders, whether chief executives or first-line supervisors, must lead through influence rather than rely on the control (or the illusion of control) that a management position implies.

Influence relies on two things:

- the ability to really understand the employee's perspective, which in turn means listening to what's being said *and* knowing how to read the messages that are being delivered nonverbally; and
- the ability to communicate congruently, to align the spoken word with body language that supports, instead of sabotages, an intended message.

**Education** When it comes to motivating students to complete their work, nonverbal behavior is a prime factor in teacher effectiveness. Research studies with fifth-grade, high school, and college students found that learners at all levels

reacted more favorably to teachers who used nonverbal *immediacy cues*: eye contact, affirmative head nodding, leaning forward, and smiling. Increasing immediacy behaviors dramatically improves students' motivation, how much they like a class, and their willingness to follow the teacher's or professor's recommendation.

**Sales** The moment salespeople meet prospective customers, the customers are being judged by how they look and what they do. The process takes about seven seconds, but the impression lasts. Making or breaking a sale often depends on the nonverbal signals that are exchanged during this initial contact. Attire, body positions, expressions, facial movements, and eye contact are all factors to be understood and managed by the successful salesperson.

**Negotiation** Masterful negotiation results from being able to correctly read between the lines of what people are saying. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to acquire an understanding of body language. Effective negotiators recognize when they need to slow down or speed up the negotiation process. They know how to relieve anxiety and calm difficult situations. Rather than relying solely on verbal cues, however, the primary way they gauge what is happening is by watching for nonverbal behavior that signals someone's unconscious, and therefore unmonitored, motivation.

**Healthcare** The relationship between physicians' nonverbal communication skills and their patients' satisfaction with medical care is substantial. Although the physicians' nonverbal communication skills won't affect patients' ratings of the technical quality of care, doctors who are more sensitive to nonverbal cues and who express what the Medical College of Virginia calls "clinical empathy" create higher overall patient satisfaction—and are sued less often!

**Law enforcement** When interrogating suspects, instead of just listening for inconsistencies in what is said, trained police officers look for minute physical reactions on the faces of people being questioned, such as fleeting smiles that may indicate when a suspect believes he has fooled a questioner.

**Customer service** It has long been believed that a positive attitude among employees is key to the effective delivery of customer service. Research shows that an employee's ability to detect nonverbal cues is just as important. An employee who is adept at reading body language is better equipped to identify what customers are truly thinking or feeling.

## *Virtually Yours*

If a business leader is going to talk about new initiatives, strategic opportunities, or organizational transformations—or if he or she has to deliver bad news—my advice is to do so face to face. Likewise, if a team (even one that is geographically dispersed) is about to embark on a collaboration, I would advise beginning that process with an in-person meeting that allows team members to get to know one another.

In face-to-face interactions, our brains process a continuous cascade of nonverbal cues that we use as the basis for building trust and professional intimacy—both of which are critical to high-level collaboration. No such subliminal interpretation takes place with e-mail or other electronic discussion forums.

Until recently, that lack of subliminal interpretation in communication technology included videoconferences, but now Cisco Systems is one of several companies (Hewlett-Packard and Apple are two others) working on products that make the virtual experience almost the same as a face-to-face



***Cisco's TelePresence Meeting is the next best thing to being there.***

interaction. I saw an amazing demonstration of Cisco's TelePresence Meeting. Using life-size high-definition video and directional sound technology, this new generation of videoconferencing makes participants like they are actually sitting in the same room with people who are on the other side of the world (or, in my case, across the Cisco campus in San Jose, California). Best of all, I was able to make eye contact with my virtual partners, and we could respond to each other's expressions and gestures.

Videoconferencing is just one aspect of a larger visual technology revolution that includes *vlogs* (video blogs—the frequent publishing of videos on the Web, featuring stream-of-consciousness content) and video-sharing Web sites such as YouTube. What this means for business professionals who used to hide behind their computer monitors is that they will soon be *viewed* instead of *read*. And they will need to sharpen their nonverbal communication skills.

## **Chapters Outline**

This book presents a subject that I have found to be fascinating and valuable throughout my professional life. You'll find photographs, cartoons, "Try This" suggestions, and real-life workplace examples. And, of course, in every chapter you'll discover the secrets of effective body language with the science that backs them up.

**Chapter 1: The Five C's of Body Language** lays a framework for the book by giving an overview of factors—context, clusters, congruence, consistency, and culture—that need to be considered when decoding the messages in someone's body language.

The next five chapters take you through the body from head to toe. **Chapter 2: Reading the Whole Body** looks at emotional body language, physical postures, posing, and leanings to show how the entire body communicates. **Chapter 3: The Eyes Have It** explains the power of eye contact, gives general definitions for a variety of eye movements, and shows how to tell the difference between a business gaze and a social gaze. **Chapter 4: Face to Face** covers facial expressions and the emotions behind them. Included are the six expressions that are universally recognized and understood (joy, sadness, surprise, fear, disgust/contempt, and anger), how to tell a real smile from a fake one, and the meaning behind head positions. **Chapter 5: Talking with Your Hands** looks at hand and arm gestures and shows how they play a part in displaying confidence, openness, resistance, and anxiety. **Chapter 6: Feet First** explores the fascinating body language of the feet and the legs—parts of the body where gestures often go unnoticed.

**Chapter 7: You're in My Space** looks at spatial zones—those distances between people that are most appropriate for intimate, personal, social, and public interactions. In this

chapter you'll learn why seating arrangements are so important in business meetings and what someone's office can tell you about the person.

**Chapter 8: The Power of Touch** examines touch cues, with special emphasis on the elements of an effective business handshake. It also looks at "touching etiquette" in the workplace and why even a momentary touch can create a human bond.

**Chapter 9: Translating Body Language across Cultures** looks at some of the cultural differences in nonverbal communication. From greeting behaviors to hand gestures to the use of personal space to body postures and touch, what feels right in one culture may be ineffective or even offensive in another.

**Chapter 10: Selling Your Message without Saying a Word** lets you see how others are interpreting your body language signals. You'll learn how to make a positive impression in that crucial first seven seconds of meeting someone, how to project your natural charisma, and how to be more confident leading team meetings or giving business presentations.

*One note:* If you think that body language skills are a way to fool or manipulate people, you may be surprised to learn that it's just the opposite. The nonverbal advantage lies in learning how to use body language to enhance sincere messages of candor, caring, and rapport. You can't fake sincerity—at least not for very long. But then, neither can anyone else.

## ***Skill Building***

Using nonverbal communication as a business tool means becoming conscious of what was previously a mostly unconscious process. Instead of just having a feeling about someone, you can learn which body signals led you to that insight—and then decide whether your conclusion was valid. Instead

of just hoping you are making a good impression, you can learn the nonverbal signals of confidence and credibility.

Mastering this essential set of professional skills is not a matter of learning something new; rather it's becoming aware of how powerful nonverbal communication is and honing your innate instincts and talents to better harness that power. This means you can become more proficient at understanding and projecting body language in a single reading of this book. And with practice you will be able to improve the reliability of your first impressions; decode eye, facial, and body gestures with conviction; quickly build rapport with clients and team members; understand what people are reading in your body language; and take control of the nonverbal messages you are sending.

Best of all—it's fun! You can sharpen your skills while waiting at the airport, during a business meeting or family dinner, or at a party with your friends. You'll be amazed at the insights you'll gain into what the body language of others is saying to you—and how much you'll learn about your own nonverbal signals. And when you apply these new insights to your professional relationships, you'll find that the nonverbal advantage becomes a key to business success.

# *The Five C's of Body Language*

**BODY LANGUAGE IS LIKE A COMPUTER.** We all know what it is, but most of us are never exactly sure how it works. That's because the process of receiving and decoding nonverbal communication is often done without our conscious awareness. It simply happens. Human beings are genetically programmed to look for facial and behavioral cues and to quickly understand their meaning. We see someone gesture and automatically make a judgment about the intention of that gesture.

And we've been doing this for a long, long time. As a species we knew how to win friends and influence people—or avoid/placate/confront those we couldn't befriend—long before we knew how to use words. Our ancestors made survival decisions based solely on intricate bits of visual information they were picking up from others. And they did so quickly. In our prehistory, rapidly deciding if a situation or person was dangerous was often a matter of life or death.

There is a world of information you can learn about people simply by observing how they use their bodies to send nonverbal cues. But to accurately decode those signals, you need to interrupt your automatic judgment system and analyze your impressions. To uncover its true meaning,

body language needs to be understood in context, viewed in clusters, evaluated for congruence with what is being said, assessed for consistency, and filtered for cultural influences. This chapter shows you how to do that.

## ***Filtering Your First Impressions: The Five C's***

Nonverbal signals play a key role in helping us form quick impressions. Our ability to do so is one of our basic survival instincts. But, as innate as this ability may be, not all our first impressions are accurate. Although our brains are hardwired to respond instantly to certain nonverbal cues, that circuitry was put in place a long time ago—when our ancient ancestors faced threats and challenges that were very different from those we face in today's modern society. Life is more complex today, with layers of social restrictions and nuanced meanings adding to the intricacies of our interpersonal dealings. This is especially true in workplace settings, where corporate culture adds its own complexities—a unique set of restrictions and guidelines for behavior.

Although first impressions may not always be accurate, you can improve your ability to read someone's body language by filtering your impressions through the five C's: context, clusters, congruence, consistency, and culture.

### ***Context***

Imagine this scene: It's a freezing-cold winter evening with a light snow falling and a north wind blowing. You see a woman—you realize it's a co-worker—sitting on a bench at a bus stop. Her head is down, her eyes are tightly closed, and she's hunched over, shivering slightly and hugging herself.

Now the scene changes: It's the same woman in the same physical position. But instead of sitting outdoors on a bench, she's seated behind her desk in the office next to yours. Her

body language is identical: head down, eyes closed, hunched over, shivering, and hugging herself. The nonverbal signals are the same, but the new setting has altered your perception of those signals. In a flash she's gone from telling you, "I'm really cold!" to saying, "I'm in distress."

The meaning of nonverbal communication changes as the context changes. Just like in real estate, location matters. We can't begin to understand someone's behavior without considering the circumstances under which the behavior occurred. As illustrated by our example, the message sent by that woman's body language changed dramatically depending on whether she was sitting outside in the cold or alone in her office. And some situations require more-formal behaviors that might be interpreted very differently in any other setting.

When people are interacting, their relationship determines much of the context. The same man talking with a client, his boss, or a subordinate may display very different body language with each. Time of day, expectations based on past encounters, and whether the interaction is taking place in a private or public setting—all these variables form the context in which body language occurs, and they need to be taken into consideration when you evaluate meaning. The key is to judge if the nonverbal behaviors are appropriate to the context in which they occur.

For example, Dave and Diane had been friends and colleagues for years. As such they stood close to each other, maintained strong eye contact, touched one another on the arm, and smiled often during their workplace conversations. No one thought to comment on this until Diane announced her engagement to another employee in the same company. Armed with that information, the next time a co-worker saw Dave and Diane smiling and enjoying each other's company, he said, "Careful now, she's engaged!"

The relationship context had suddenly changed. Apparently, nonverbal behavior that was deemed appropriate for Dave when Diane was “single,” was now viewed as a potential problem.

### **TRY THIS**

**Choose one nonverbal behavior (say, touching a colleague on the arm) and list all the conditions under which the behavior would be acceptable in your company or organization. Now list all the contextual changes that might make this gesture inappropriate.**

**Ask yourself how changing the physical location (in a private office, in a meeting room with several colleagues, on-stage when being presented an award, or in the hallway when involved in casual conversation) could alter the meaning of the gesture.**

**How could the status of the individuals involved or the quality of their relationship change the nonverbal message being sent?**

## **Clusters**

Nonverbal cues occur in a *gesture cluster*—a group of movements, postures, and actions that reinforce a common point. A single gesture can have several meanings or mean nothing at all (sometimes a cigar *is* just a cigar), but when you couple that single gesture with other nonverbal signals, the meaning becomes clearer. A person may cross her arms for any number of reasons, but when the gesture is coupled with a scowl, a headshake, and legs turned away from you, you have a composite picture and reinforcement to conclude that she is resistant to whatever you just proposed.

Always remember to look for clusters of behaviors. A person’s overall demeanor is far more telling than a single gesture viewed independently.

A savvy manager I know begins every staff meeting by taking off his jacket, and he chooses a chair at the center of

the conference table (not at the head). Those behaviors alone would send a message of informality, but it's the rest of his gestures that drive the point home. Whenever anyone in the meeting speaks, the manager leans forward with an expression of interest on his face, nods approvingly, and gives the speaker full eye contact. This cluster of gestures symbolically sets the stage for exactly what he wants the meeting to be—a rank-free exchange of ideas and questions.

### **TRY THIS**

**Count to three. That is, refrain from assuming that any single gesture has a particular meaning until you see two corroborating gestures that reinforce that same meaning.**

## **Congruence**

A classic study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at the University of California at Los Angeles found that the *total impact* of a message is based on 7 percent words used, 38 percent tone of voice, and 55 percent facial expressions, hand gestures, body position, and other forms of nonverbal communication.

Obviously, you can't watch a person speaking in a foreign language and understand 93 percent of what is being communicated. (Mehrabian was studying only the communication of *feelings*—particularly the feelings of like and dislike.) Still, you can bet that when the verbal and nonverbal channels of communication are out of sync, people—especially women—tend to rely on the nonverbal message and disregard the verbal content.

When thoughts and words are in tune (that is, when people believe what they are saying), you see it corroborated in their body language. Their gestures and expressions are in alignment with what is being said.

You also see *incongruence*, where gestures contradict words: a side-to-side headshake while saying yes or someone frowning and staring at the ground while telling you she is happy. Incongruence is a sign not so much of intentional deceit but of inner conflict between what someone is thinking and what he or she is saying.

I noticed this conflict in Sheila, a manager I was coaching. Sheila appeared calm and reasonable as she listed the reasons why she should delegate more responsibility to her staff. But every time she expressed these opinions, she also (almost imperceptibly) shuddered. While Sheila's words declared her intention of empowering her employees, the quick, involuntary shudder was saying loud and clear, "I don't want to do this!"

### **TRY THIS**

Here's an exercise that I suggest practicing *outside* of your workplace: Whenever someone asks you a question that can be answered with a simple yes or no (for example, "Would you like fries with that?"), answer in the affirmative while subtly shaking your head from side to side. Then watch how others react to the incongruence in your response.

## **Consistency**

You need to know a person's *baseline* behavior under relaxed or generally stress-free conditions so that you can compare it with the expressions and the gestures that appear when that person is under stress. What is his normal way of looking around, of sitting, of standing when relaxed? How does he respond when discussing some nonthreatening topic? Knowing someone's behavioral baseline enhances your ability to spot meaningful deviations.

One of the strategies that experienced police interrogators use for spotting dishonesty is to ask a series of nonthreatening questions while observing how the subject behaves when there is no reason to lie. Then, when the more difficult issues get addressed, the officers watch for changes in nonverbal behavior that indicate deception around key points.

### **TRY THIS**

**The best way to understand someone's baseline behavior is to observe him over an extended period of time. So, when you interact with your business colleagues, begin to notice—*really* notice—how they look when they are relaxed and comfortable. How much eye contact do they make? What kind of gestures do they use? What body postures do they assume?**

**Then, once you know what is normal for your co-workers, you will be able to quickly and accurately detect even minor shifts when their body language behavior is out of character.**

We all run into problems trying to evaluate the consistency of someone we've just met. The following is an example of something that happened to me a few years ago.

I was giving a presentation to the chief executive officer (CEO) of a financial services company, outlining a speech I was scheduled to deliver to his leadership team the next day. And it wasn't going well. Our meeting lasted almost an hour, and through that entire time the CEO sat at the conference table with his arms tightly crossed. He didn't once smile or nod in encouragement. When I finished, he said, "Thank you" (without making eye contact) and left the room.

As I'm a body language *expert*, I was sure that his nonverbal communication was telling me that my speaking engagement would be canceled. But when I walked to the elevator, the CEO's assistant came up to me to tell me how impressed

her boss had been with my presentation. I was shocked and asked how he would have reacted had he *not* liked it. “Oh,” said the assistant, her smile acknowledging that she had previously seen that reaction as well. “He would have gotten up in the middle of your presentation and walked out!”

The only nonverbal signals that I had received from that CEO were ones I judged to be negative. What I didn’t realize was that, for this individual, that was normal behavior.

## **Culture**

All nonverbal communication is influenced by our cultural heritage, which is discussed at length in chapter 9. For now it’s important to understand that when reading body language you should consider the amount of stress the person is under. That’s because the higher the emotional level, the more likely it is that culture-specific gestures will show up.

In addition, body language is affected by the many subcultures of which we’re a part. Take posture, for example. Ballet dancers are trained to hold their bodies chest-forward, so you’ll often see them standing like this with their heels together and toes pointed out (a modified first position). Many office workers are round-shouldered with a slight slump in the chest from hours spent hunched over their keyboards. Military personnel often carry a shoulders-back, spine-straight stance long after their tour of duty has concluded.

People from different regions of the same country may also use their bodies very differently. Take, for example, the fast-paced stride of a typical New Yorker and contrast it with the more leisurely gait of someone from the South. Or think of the potential body language differences between a prototypically reserved and formal New Englander and his more casual California counterpart.

The more you know about a person's background, hobbies, and interests, the more you can understand why certain gestures or postures are part of her unique repertoire—and why deviation from these patterns is significant. Sometimes people shift postures as they shift subjects. In my therapy practice, I would often see patients assume one posture when talking about their mother and a completely different posture when discussing their father.

### **TRY THIS**

**Choose one business colleague and make a list of everything you know about her background, including her ethnic heritage, where she was born and raised, her hobbies, her family, and the sports or physical activities she enjoys. Once you have a full list, start observing your co-worker to see if you can spot the nonverbal cues that are a result of some part of her background.**

Keep in mind the five C's—context, clusters, congruence, consistency, and culture—as you go through the rest of this book. There is no doubt that people use nonverbal communication to reveal their state of mind. But reading body language isn't just about learning nonverbal signals; it is also about understanding how to get to the real meaning behind those signals.

this material has been excerpted from

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