CHAPTER 2

Reading the Whole Body

KINESICS IS THE TERM that refers to body movements and the meanings they communicate. By paying careful attention to a variety of body movements—such as posture, leanings, and breathing patterns—and noticing when someone makes a sudden transition from one position to another, you can get a good idea of the other person's shifting mood and attitude. In this chapter you'll see how body movements send their unique messages. You'll also learn why *mirroring*—a communication technique of mimicking another person's posture and gestures—is a powerful way to build rapport.

Emotional Body Language

In the past, scientists thought that human emotions were mainly read and transferred through facial expressions. New research from the field of cognitive and affective neuroscience suggests that whole-body signals can be just as significant in emotional communication and decision-making. This connection is especially powerful when it involves fear. A person's expression may convey to you that there's a threat, but

it gives you no information about how to react to the threat. (Should you fight, flee, or freeze?) Emotional body language shows what other people are *doing* in response to the fear.

The findings also suggest that the immediate response to other people's fear may be more automatic than previously thought. The results may help explain how fear spreads—as the immediate, but unconscious, response to others' fear.

Is your organization going through a major change—downsizing, reorganization, or acquisition? If so, you have been exposed to (and have reacted to) other employees' fear. And your emotional reaction may have led to decisions and actions that you later justified by rational thinking. The more you become aware of this powerful, instantaneous link, the more you gain insight into your own behavior and that of your co-workers.

/e're Wired to Connect

Nonverbal communication has been the subject of extensive research over the past several years, yet some of the most interesting findings come when least expected. One such finding came from a laboratory in Italy, where scientists were studying the brain cells of macaque monkeys.

Researchers had confirmed that when a monkey performs a single highly specific hand action, neurons in the motor cortex are very active. For example, every time a monkey reached for a peanut, certain cells on either side of its brain "fired," creating a buzzing sound that was detectible by highly sophisticated monitoring equipment.

One day a monkey wired up for such an experiment happened to see a human grab a peanut. Much to the researchers' surprise, the same neurons fired in the same way. In terms of motor cell activity, the monkey's brain *could not tell the difference between actually doing something and seeing it done.* Because

the cells reflected the actions that the monkey observed in others, the neuroscientists named them "mirror neurons."

Later experiments confirmed the existence of mirror neurons in humans. This system of neurons allows the brain to perform its highest tasks, including learning and imitating. But the research revealed another surprise. For human beings, in addition to mirroring actions, the cells reflected sensations and feelings.

Ever wonder why when someone near you yawns you also yawn? Or why you cringe when you see another person getting a vaccination? Turns out it's your mirror neurons at work. The moment you see an emotion expressed on someone's face—or read it in her gestures or posture—you unconsciously place yourself in the other person's "mental shoes" and begin to sense that same emotion within yourself. For this reason mirror neurons are sometimes referred to as Dalai Lama neurons because they provide a biological basis for compassion.

Matters of the Heart

One way that people show their emotions is by shifts in the chest. Some of these movements are subtle; others are more obvious, but, large or small, they are always revealing. The heart, brain, and nervous system are so closely interlocked that you can often tell whether someone is happy or depressed by simply observing how he holds his chest. A promotion may have a person walking around with his chest "puffed out with pride"; an acute disappointment may result in rounded shoulders and a concave chest—the look of someone "kicked in the stomach." It's also been noted that when men are comfortable with their surroundings, they unbutton their jackets (an unconscious gesture that removes a barrier to showing their hearts?).

The metaphors we use to describe emotional experiences connected with the heart are, in fact, perhaps most revealing of all. "Her heart sank." "He was heartsick about it." These aren't just descriptive phrases; they are based on physiological fact. (The National Institute for Mental Health posits a direct link between depression and heart problems.)

On the positive side, we use phrases like "His heart was in his throat" to describe the heart-pumping combination of adrenaline and endorphins that flood us in moments of elation as the sympathetic nervous system gets charged and ready for action. When people are excited and happy, they fill up with those good feelings. Look for a sudden upper-body shift—usually upward and forward—and a big inhalation.

A display of very good feelings

The Breath of Life

When you inhale, you are literally feeding yourself. The human organism can go weeks without food and days without water yet only a few minutes without air. You knew that, of course. But did you know that *how* you breathe reveals a lot about your emotional state?

For example: Holding one's breath is a primitive instinct—a self-protection mechanism (part of the "freeze" component in the fight, flight, or freeze response) when hiding from a predator. Today, even though predators are more symbolic, any anxiety can cause a person to hold his breath or to breathe in small, shallow breaths. (On polygraph exams, people who are going to lie tend to stop breathing, and it shows up on the machine.)

Shallow breathing is also a strong signal of low confidence. If a speaker is taking shallow breaths while trying to give a pep talk, regardless of how well spoken she is, listeners find it difficult to believe anything she says. And one person's shallow-breathing pattern can affect other people's emotional states as well. The natural tendency of people to mirror and adopt the rhythms of those around them extends to breathing rates. Without any of the parties being aware of how it happened, a shallow breather can make an entire room feel anxious.

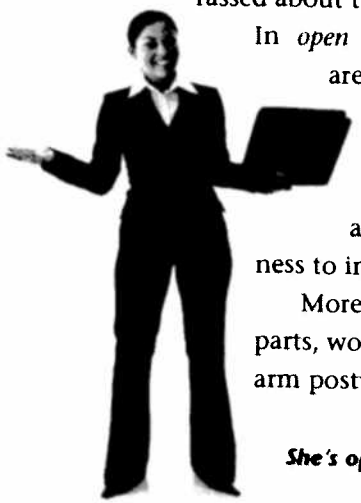
TRY THIS

When you're talking with your co-workers, watch their breathing patterns. Pay attention to how deeply or shallowly people breathe and notice how you respond to the different breathing patterns. If you're in a group, notice how a deep inhalation often signals that a person is about to speak, and the entire group will unconsciously pick up the signal and turn toward that person.

Body Postures: Closed and Open

I recently addressed a group of managers from a major international firm about the importance of interpersonal business skills. All the managers actively participated in the session, asking questions and volunteering answers. All, that is, except one woman who sat for the entire session with her shoulders rounded, head tilted forward, and body twisted slightly toward the exit. At the end of the program, she said, "I'm not really a 'people person.' I'm just not comfortable with this touchy-feely stuff." But of course I already knew that. And so did everyone else in the room. The woman's body language had been shouting out her discomfort all morning.

In *closed* body postures, arms are folded, legs are crossed, and the entire body is usually turned away. Lower status is often shown by bowing the head (a subservient gesture) and holding the body to make it appear smaller (and less of a threat) than it actually is. Rounding the upper body and hiding the hands are closed signs that also represent feelings of vulnerability. Remember, of course, that there are no absolutes associated with any of these conclusions. A man who hides his hands, for example, may also mean that he is just embarrassed about the appearance of his fingernails.



In *open* and receptive body postures, legs are uncrossed and arms are open with palms exposed. If the arms are relaxed at the sides of the body, this is also generally a sign of openness, accessibility, and an overall willingness to interact.

More predictably than their male counterparts, women—when sitting—adopt an open-arm posture in the presence of someone they

She's open to you and your ideas.

like, and they tend to fold their arms across their chest when they feel indifferent to or dislike the other person.

Two things I know for sure about open and closed postures:

- Individuals with open body positions are perceived more positively than those with closed body positions.
- Individuals with open body positions are more persuasive than those with closed body positions.

TRY THIS

Compare the body language of your co-workers. Watch the people who are the most convincing and successful. I bet you'll find that they typically use open body positions when interacting with colleagues and presenting their ideas.

Body posture may also show someone's status in a group. I've seen meetings where all subordinates slumped, while the leader assumed a more erect posture that indicated his dominance. (I've also watched two executives of similar heights meeting for the first time and saw both men straighten their postures and stretch their bodies to emphasize their respective heights.) These positions were taken without any of the participants' being aware of their postures. But sometimes awareness *does* play a role. People of equal status tend to mirror one another, but people of high status may deliberately adopt a different posture to show that they are not just one of the gang.

A posture that Charles, Prince of Wales, often assumes—head held high, chin out, and one palm holding the other hand behind his back—is a high-confidence pose. The person assuming this posture exposes the entire front of his or her body—as an unconscious act of fearlessness or superiority.

Leanings

Positive attitudes toward others tend to be accompanied by leaning forward—especially when sitting down.

When two people like each other, you'll see them both lean in. In groups, outsiders typically stand with their weight on one foot, while those who are really "in" lean forward a little and tip their heads forward. Research shows that individuals who lean forward tend to increase the verbal output of the person with whom they're speaking.

An agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms admitted to using this strategy when questioning a suspect. "When it looks as if the suspect is going to confess," he told me, "I lean toward him. I might even touch his arm. This creates an intimacy that allows for the suspect to confess in a whisper instead of a 'room voice.' It also allows me to speak in a lower, more compassionate tone of voice."

Leaning in to connect

TRY THIS

If you use leaning as a business technique, be aware that leaning toward a person in the early stages of a conversation will generally be perceived as encroaching on his territory. Early leans can make people uncomfortable and *decrease* their perception of you as likable. So wait until you've developed a level of rapport and interpersonal comfort, *then* make your move.

Leaning backward usually signals feelings of dislike or negativity. It's a hardwired response from the limbic brain; we subconsciously try to distance ourselves from anyone or anything that is unpleasant, disagreeable, or dangerous. In a seated conversation, leaning backward can also communicate dominance.

Leaning away to distance himself

When viewed as part of a cluster, different combinations of body tilts and open or closed postures can signal these generalized meanings:

- Leaning back with a closed body posture can show disinterest or disagreement.
- Leaning back with an open body posture can indicate contemplation.
- Leaning forward with a closed body posture can signal hostility.
- Leaning forward with an open body posture can show interest or agreement.
- Leaning sideways (and slightly back) with asymmetrical arm and leg positions and loosely held hands can be a sign of relaxation and ease. I've also noticed that people tend to engage in more sideways leans when interacting with lower-status individuals than with higher-status individuals.

TRY THIS

With everyone you encounter, visualize them as a traffic signal. If the person is displaying open postures and gestures, think of this as a green light to proceed with your interaction. If the person's body sends signals of disbelief or defensiveness (yellow light), you'll know to slow down and advance with caution. Defiant closed positions accompanied by facial scowls are the equivalent of a red stoplight—and your cue to back off or try an entirely new approach.

When He Has All the Answers

Someone feeling confident or superior will often sit, leaning back with his hands behind his head and his fingers interlocked (this is a mostly masculine gesture).

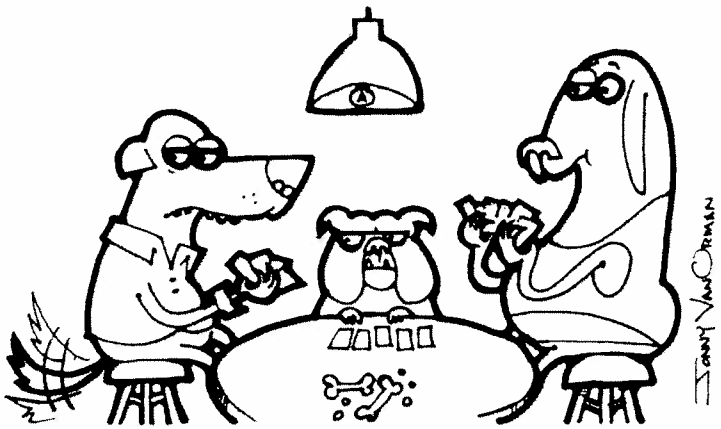
Because it can be irritating to deal with someone with this "I have all the answers" posture, there are a couple of ways to counteract it. You can mirror the gesture, which will show agreement ("We think alike") and hopefully put the person at ease. Or, if the person using the hands-behind-the-head gesture is trying to intimidate you, your matching posture will be seen as a nonverbal challenge to his know-it-all attitude. You can also encourage him to change position by handing him something so that he has to move his hands from behind his head and lean forward to accept the item.

Confidence or superiority

Bodies under Stress

Fundamentally, there are two kinds of nonverbal signals that people send: one that shows someone is comfortable and another that indicates some level of anxiety or stress. Except for the rare sociopath, deception is generally accompanied by stress, which is often manifested in closed and defensive postures such as crossing one's arms, with palms hidden, and leaning away from a questioner.

Nervousness or excitement, positive or negative, is often displayed as excessive movement. When people are very agitated, they can't seem to stay in one position. Their hands may tremble, they may perspire excessively (especially on the upper lip), or, when standing, they may rock from one leg to another. For many the ultimate stereotype of this behavior is the worried baseball manager pacing back and forth in the dugout. For others it is the poker player who leaks nonverbal "tells" about the hand he was dealt.



Rufus had mastered the poker face. The poker tail, on the other hand...

Hands on Hips

The little girl in the grocery store was having none of it. Her mother's promise of "pizza as soon as we finish shopping" was failing to make an impression. The girl wanted pizza and she wanted it *now*! There she stood, feet firmly planted shoulder-width apart and hands balled in tight little fists on her hips.

You've seen this gesture too. Often. Whether in a stubborn toddler or a defiant adult, hands on hips is one of the most common gestures people use to communicate an aggressive, superconfident, or independent attitude.

The stance of defiance

Remember that, like every other gesture, it is important to look for clusters and to consider the circumstances in which the gesture takes place—its context. Hands on hips and a tapping foot from a man waiting for his co-worker to finish a report may be more a sign of frustration with the delay than of real anger. But if you also notice that the man's jacket is open (a fearless pose that exposes the front of his body), his hands are on his hips, and he is squared off in front of his co-worker with an angry facial expression, you would be justified in concluding that the situation has escalated beyond mere irritation.

Seated Readiness

People often signal that they are ready to end a conversation by assuming the position of someone ready to rise. They may move to the edge of the chair, or they may lean forward with their hands on the arms of the chair or on their knees. If you are aware of someone assuming these postures while you are speaking, you should read that signal and quickly finish what you are saying.

TRY THIS

If you're in sales, this tip is for you. A research team videotaped insurance salespeople interviewing potential buyers and found this fascinating correlation: If the customer displayed a chin-stroking gesture (the decision-making signal) and followed it by a crossed-arms position, the sale was off. But if chin stroking was followed by this seated readiness position, the client almost always bought the policy.

So be on the lookout for the chin stroke and seated-readiness cluster of gestures. When you spot it, go for the close!

Body Orientation

The degree to which someone's legs and shoulders face the direction of someone else indicates the level of liking or the status of that person. The more someone's body orientation is toward you, the better your chances that the other person has a positive attitude about you. When you see people turn their bodies away from you, you've probably lost their interest. In fact, orienting away from someone almost always conveys detachment or boredom regardless of the words spoken.

But orienting your body directly toward another person can also be off-putting. Standing in a squared-off position—"toe to toe"—may be equated with confrontation. Imagine the body positions of two men just before they fight. Or picture the baseball manager who was pacing back and forth in the dugout: now he's out on the field, squaring off with the umpire with whom he disagrees. For males an oblique-angle position is unconsciously perceived as more open and friendly. In his squared-off position, you can bet the baseball manager is not feeling particularly friendly toward the umpire.

A friendly oblique orientation for men

Women, on the other hand, are comfortable facing one another more directly.

Women tend to orient toward each other more directly.

TRY THIS

When approaching a male colleague (regardless of whether you are male or female), do so from the side. When approaching a female, walk directly up to her.

Mirroring

My husband and his father were talking in the kitchen when I walked into the room. I'll always remember that sight: They were sitting at the table, mirror images of each other. Both men were leaning back with their hands behind their heads and their elbows wide apart, and both had their legs loosely crossed. They were deeply engrossed in conversation—totally oblivious to the physical postures they had assumed. I didn't have to overhear what they were saying to realize that (at that moment) father and son were in total rapport.

It's called *limbic synchrony,* and it's hardwired in the human brain.

We all do it. Babies do it even before birth, where their heartbeats and bodily functions have a rhythm that matches those of their mothers. As adults we do it when we are talking with someone we like or are interested in. We subconsciously switch our body posture to match that of the other person—mirroring that person's nonverbal behavior and signaling that we are connected and engaged.

When a colleague mirrors your body language, it's his way of nonverbally saying that he likes or agrees with you. And if you are one of two equal-status executives in a discussion, you may both, unknowingly, be adopting similar postures to maintain your respective positions of authority.

When done with intent, mirroring can be an important part of developing business relationships. Whether you are a team leader, a teacher, or a therapist, an effective way to build rapport (or to increase a person's comfort when he or she is resistant) is to utilize this technique. Mirroring starts by observing a person's body posture and then subtly letting your body reflect his position. If *his* arms are crossed, slowly begin to cross *your* arms. If he leans back, you do the same. In my work as a therapist, I would even mimic a client's breathing pattern—inhaling and exhaling in sync with his or her rhythm.

It's a proven method. A recent research study observed two different teachers as they taught students. One used mirroring; the other did not. The students' reactions were substantially more positive toward the teacher who used mirroring techniques. They believed that that teacher was much more successful, friendly, and appealing.

When a person is closed off or resistant, the easiest way to increase her comfort level is to use mirroring. This technique is useful with clients, sales prospects, customers, and co-workers. It is a silent signal that you are positively relating to the other person. But before you try it out on the boss, you can practice on strangers.

TRY THIS

The next time you are sitting in a waiting room or on an airplane, slowly begin to mirror a person sitting next to you. (This also works in restaurants when the other person is at a different table but there is a line of sight between you.) Subtly mimic the position of his legs and then the movement of arms and hands. Finally, if you are sitting close enough, see if you can inhale and exhale with the same rhythm as the person you are mirroring. You may be surprised at how quickly he responds and starts a conversation with you. (This is *not* the technique to practice on an airplane if you prefer flying without chatting with your seatmate.)

In business situations, you know that you have developed mutual rapport if your partner begins to mirror you in return. Change your arm position and see if she will match your movement into the new posture. If you were to use this technique in a sales presentation and your prospect subconsciously matched your body language, it would be a signal of trust and rapport. But if your prospect mismatched, you should consider the possibility that she isn't yet convinced.

There are other forms of behavioral congruence in which people imitate each other without realizing it. *Interactional synchronizing* occurs when people move at the same time in the same way, simultaneously picking up coffee cups or starting to speak at the same time. This often happens when we are getting along well with another person, and it can feel as though we are on the same wavelength. In fact, synchronizing is the result of our subliminal monitoring of, and responding to, one another's nonverbal cues.

One executive told me that in a negotiation session he often mirrors the posture of the person with whom he's dealing. He noticed that doing so gives him a better sense of

We naturally mirror when we're in rapport.

what the other person is experiencing. I've noticed this as well. Our bodies and emotions are so closely linked that by assuming another person's posture, you are not only gaining rapport but are actually able to get a feel for his or her frame of mind.

In his book *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy,* psychologist Carl Rogers wrote, "Real communication occurs when we listen with understanding—to see the idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to them, to achieve their frame of reference in regard to the thing they are talking about."

Reaching that goal of *real communication*—of understanding, of empathy—is why nonverbal literacy is so crucial to our professional success.

For leaders those communication skills can play a key role in making sure that the workforce truly receives and understands the messages they wish to send. Consider the case of one Fortune 25 company, where "town hall meetings" provided an ongoing opportunity for small groups of

employees to get up close and personal with the CEO. Time after time employees would ask about policies or pending organizational changes that had already been communicated in company publications and through dozens of e-mail announcements.

After the meetings the CEO would ask his communications manager, "How many times have we told them about that? Why don't they *know* that?"

"Oh, they know it," the communications manager would reply. "They just want to hear it from you. More importantly, they want to be able to *look* at you when you say it."