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## Ten Things Every Manager Should Know About Nonverbal Behavior

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## SUMMARY

Managers—whether they realize it or not—have a profound influence over how people they work with think and feel. This article presents ten nonverbal behaviors managers should (or should not) be doing, the science behind them, and the tools to start modifying them. The ten topics covered are: avoiding micro-aggressions, liking and valuing others, building trust and consensus, listening, resting “cranky face,” power, status, intelligence, deception, and how to leverage the “wisdom of the crowd” to better “read” others. Knowing these nonverbal strategies can potentially make managers more effective in their workplace.

**KEYWORDS:** nonverbal communication/behavior, social psychology, power and influence, social influence, social power, racial discrimination

**M**ost of what managers know about nonverbal communication is either patently false or not backed by science. Presented here are ten things every manager should know about nonverbal behavior; which, if put into practice, can help managers to interact more persuasively, smoothly, comfortably, and amicably with others at work. The bottom line is that this advice and the science upon which it is based can help make managers more effective and, by extension, more confident.

## A Bit of History on the Power of Nonverbal Behavior

In 1960, Robert Rosenthal, a psychologist at the University of North Dakota, was studying the way rats learn to run a maze. He noticed that some experimenters, who presumably liked their little furry subjects, pet them more,

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spoke to them with sweeter voices, and generally were more attentive to them. The result? Healthier and happier, “advantaged” rats, compared with those rats who were treated “like they were rats”—with distance, no petting, and no sweet voices. Interestingly, Rosenthal began to notice that these “advantaged” rats seemed to be learning their mazes faster. He wondered, “Is it possible the experimenters’ behavior is actually influencing the rats’ maze-learning performance?”

Rosenthal designed an experiment to put this question to the test. He randomly assigned genetically identical rats to researchers in the lab. He also randomly assigned the instruction he gave to researchers. Rosenthal told half of the researchers their rats were “maze bright” and likely to learn mazes quickly. The other half of the researchers were told their rats were “maze dull” and not likely to learn quickly. Rosenthal measured two things: if the researchers treated their rats differently and how quickly the rats learned their mazes.

Sure enough, experimenters who were told they had “maze bright” rats were more encouraging, affectionate, and spoke more sweetly to their rats. They also were more likely to peer over the maze with high expectations than the researchers who were told their rats were “maze dull.” Despite that there was really no difference between the rats at all, the “maze bright” rats learned the mazes more quickly and remembered them for longer.<sup>1</sup>

You may already know that others’ expectations of you matter, but Bob Rosenthal’s work was the first in the history of psychology to find that (at least as far as rats go) experimenters’ expectations had a direct effect on others’ performance. This finding, after repeated replication in rats, was then tested on schoolchildren. “Bright” kids were treated differently by their teachers, performed better in school, raised their hands more often, and were called on more often. Most persuasive, the youngest students, the first graders, evidenced an increase in IQ of 27 points after a year of being in an experiment.<sup>2</sup> This increase in IQ is almost two standard deviations and can make a tremendous difference over the course of a life. This experiment, the first of its kind, was called “Pygmalion in the Classroom” (in homage to the play by George Bernard Shaw).

Rosenthal was promptly hired away from the University of North Dakota by Harvard University. He went on to give rise to our understanding of some foundational phenomena in psychology, including “expectancy effects” and, by extension, a concept many business people are aware of, the “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

The practical implications of Rosenthal’s work were extraordinary. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and medical community quickly heard of and realized the value in Rosenthal’s work. In most of the drug and therapy studies up to that date, doctors had known which patients were in the experimental condition and which had been given the placebo. Rosenthal had just demonstrated that basically most prior drug studies would need to be thrown out. Analyses suggested that the stronger a doctor’s expectations for the efficacy of a drug, the more effective the drug was (as indicated by self-report from the

patient).<sup>3</sup> An extensive inquiry suggested the doctors treated the patients differently, mostly in their nonverbal behaviors. They spoke to them longer, made more eye contact, smiled more, and were more encouraging and hopeful in their overall nonverbal behavior.

The entire field of medical research was disrupted. The FDA and the medical community now require double-blind, placebo controlled studies in which both doctor and patient are blind to who is getting the drug/treatment versus who is receiving the placebo. This methodology is the only way to know for sure if the efficacy, safety, and side effects of medical therapies are real.

What is the moral of the story? Your behavior has a large effect on others—how they feel about themselves, how well they perform, and whether or not they feel validated and included.

## Here Are Ten Things Every Manager Should Know about Nonverbal Behavior

This list was selected on the basis that these behaviors are fairly easy to express; most of the behaviors can be used by all gender identities; and many of the behaviors are appropriate across cultures (although not all—in particular, eye contact is considered disrespectful in some cultures—and a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article). The nonverbal variables listed here have been the subject of many empirical articles.

### #1—Avoiding Micro-Aggressions


You probably have no problem imagining all the negative nonverbal micro-aggressions we have thrown at each other from across the room. Scowls, side-eye, eye rolls, pointing, and raising your voice. These are obvious negative behaviors. Even the smallest negative “look” at another person can be a micro-aggression.<sup>4</sup> What is less obvious is the *absence of positive behavior*. The absence of positive behavior is also a micro-aggression. Behaviors such as smiles, looking at others, speaking to others, leaning toward others, and standing or sitting closely with others are all nonverbal signals of “I like you,” “I want to include you,” “I feel close to you,” “I hear you,” “I understand you,” “I am engaged by you,” and so on. The *absence* of these positive behaviors are extremely powerful indicators that *you do not value some people, while valuing others* at whom you do smile and speak and sit close to.<sup>5</sup>

To be clear, your nonverbal behavior toward others—even positive behavior like smiling (or not smiling)—has a huge impact on how included and valued (or devalued) others feel. How does smiling make people feel devalued, you are probably asking? Because we smile unequally at people. A micro-aggression can be something as seemingly innocuous as smiling more at some people and slightly less at others.

Imagine you are at a meeting with 11 people sitting around an oval table. You are addressing the group with an important message. You make eye contact with and smile at appropriate times when turning your attention toward certain people. Maybe you know those people better. Perhaps your colleague just got a new pair of snappy new horn-rimmed glasses that draw your gaze and smile. The problem is: you are not looking and smiling at the other ten people. Maybe you aren't looking and smiling at them because you don't know them well. Maybe it takes more effort to turn your head toward some people around that big 11-person oval table. Or maybe, it is for no reason at all. We are often mentally exhausted when speaking to a group—in our own heads making sure we are saying the right things in a compelling way. Where our eyes and smiles land is something we are not paying attention to nor aware of. But it matters—a lot.

The problem is, *your lack of eye contact and smiles do not go unnoticed*. They are noticed especially by those you are not engaging with. Additionally, others around you are also noticing. When you have power, you can easily—with the flash of a smile—send the following message: “I find Juan, Sametria, and Frederick valuable but Jamaal, Sarah, and Xavier less valuable.” Even worse, the ripple effect of your micro-aggressions affects others' perceptions and judgments of these not-looked-at people. In other words, onlookers can literally “catch” your perceived attitudes and evaluations of others—even if those perceived attitudes and evaluations are not accurate.<sup>6</sup>

If you want people to feel equal to one another and you want to create an environment of inclusivity, your nonverbal behavior matters a lot—especially if you are the boss. To summarize, micro-aggressions can be acts of commission (behaving in a negative way) or acts of omission (withholding positive behavior). So what do you do to make everyone at that oval table feel included? The toolbox below lists simple, immediately actionable behaviors you can use toward to goal of making sure everyone feels equally included and has an equal right to be “at the table.”



### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

*Avoiding Micro-aggressions*

1. Look equally at people while you are speaking
2. Speak to people for an equal amount of time
3. Smile equally at people
4. Sit or stand (within your comfort zone) equally across people
5. Orient your body an equal amount toward all people

## #2—Liking and Valuing Others

It might be surprising to discover how easy it is to express liking and value toward others with a few nonverbal behaviors. Some of the behaviors associated with inclusivity overlap with the behaviors you can use to express platonic liking and valuing.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the behaviors associated with increasing feelings of inclusivity, demonstrating liking and valuing others involve the behaviors just

discussed in the previous section.<sup>8</sup> Additional behaviors that signal liking and valuing others are synchrony, mimicry, listening, and ensuring conversational turn-taking.<sup>9</sup>

Synchrony is the simultaneous action of two or more people at once. Imagine those 11 people around that oval table tapping on the table in tune with one another—on beat—tap, tap, tap. It is also something that can be observed on sports fields before games when team members chant or move or dance in synchrony with one another. Synchrony in organizational settings can be fun, interesting, and exert powerful impact on how connected a team feels to each other, to you, or how a sole interaction partner feels toward you. You can accomplish this by, for example, having chairs that are all the same height. You can set norms such that during a meeting all must make eye contact with the speaker and nod when they are inspired by something, agree with a statement, or are feeling connected to what is being stated. The norm of nodding and looking will be synchronous as all members of the group will be doing it. When in a one-on-one interaction, synchrony can be accomplished through a shared activity or even enjoying the same lunch. All of these are different versions of “doing the same thing at the same time.”<sup>10</sup> And when we are “in step” with others, they feel liked and valued by us and, likewise, they like and value us more, too.

Mimicry is similar to synchrony in that both are about “sameness.” However, there is a time-lag with mimicry such that if person A moves closer to the oval table, so do you—within a few seconds.<sup>11</sup> The optimal amount of time to “imitate” another person’s behavior is a few seconds otherwise, if done too quickly, it is obvious that you are copying them and will appear inauthentic. Likewise, too much time passing also renders the attempted mimicry ineffective. When others are appropriately imitating our nonverbal behavior, whether it be a hand gesture, crossing one’s arms, touching one’s hair, or any contextually appropriate behavior, we like them more—and when we do it, it makes others feel likewise liked and valued—“seen and heard.”<sup>12</sup>

Listening to others is very important. Research shows that emergent leaders have better listening skills—meaning they not only truly listen more, but are perceived as listening.<sup>13</sup> Listening—both actually and being perceived as listening—promotes our colleagues, team members, and workers to feel liked and valued.<sup>14</sup> Finally, conversational turn-taking in a group allows everyone to add their unique value. Not only do group members feel valued and heard, but the product of the group tends to be optimized.<sup>15</sup> The bottom line is that small, easy-to-control, easy-to-practice nonverbal behaviors can have a meaningful impact on the way you make others feel liked and valued.



### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

#### *Liking and Valuing Others*

1. Look at people while you are speaking
2. Smile at people
3. Sit or stand (within your comfort zone) closer to people
4. Orient your body and lean in toward other people
5. Synchronize your behaviors with others
6. Mimic others (not too much) within 5 seconds
7. Show that you are listening through eye contact, head nodding, and not interrupting

### #3—*Building Trust and Consensus*

There are many contexts in which you may wish or need to build consensus among colleagues, your subordinates, or more likely a group or team or board to which you belong. Above and beyond making others feel valued and heard, there are additional behaviors you can use to build trust and consensus. While seeing eye-to-eye on intellectual or procedural matters is, of course, the most critical feature that leads to building consensus, there is a psychological phenomenon lurking below the content surface that can significantly contribute to consensus-building—even when people do not agree on that content. That psychological phenomenon is trust. Trust can sometimes be easy to achieve. Sometimes it is sufficiently broken so that it is hard to resurrect. However, there are some nonverbal techniques that can be used to both express trust and increase trust among two or more people.

Signaling that you trust and can be trusted by others is easy. You should express an open body posture (which signals I trust you not to hurt me and you can trust that I am open to what you are saying). You should look at people while you are listening to them (to signal “I am listening and I hear you”). Finally, among the most powerful tools one can use between two people or in a group of people is what researchers have called “Collective Intelligence.”<sup>16</sup> Pairs and groups high on Collective Intelligence tend to be higher on interpersonal trust, tend to come to consensus more easily (and without a “group think” type error), and tend to produce higher quality results.<sup>17</sup> The key to Collective Intelligence is conversational turn-taking. By taking turns contributing, everyone feels heard and feels they have had the opportunity to contribute. Even if people do not “get their way,” they feel a sense of procedural fairness and are significantly more likely to accept and support the outcome because they felt the process was fair: they were heard and their contributions were considered. Conversational turn-taking can be facilitated nonverbally by a team leader or even someone who is merely comfortable in that role. Sometimes to start, you may wish to use words along with a nonverbal gesture such as an open hand that gently refers to another person as if to say with the hand “your turn.”

After a short time, the process becomes more fluid and purely nonverbal. You can also use eye contact to suggest to a colleague or group member that it is their turn to contribute—this is especially effective after it is you who has just spoken. It is like using your eyes to “pass the [conversational] ball.”<sup>18</sup> This is also particularly effective if you are the boss or leader of the group. Note that pointing can be a bit harsh—we typically do not like being pointed at—and can often be perceived as signals of aggression.<sup>19</sup>



#### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

*Building Trust and Consensus*


1. Open body posture, arms uncrossed, limbs expanded appropriately
2. Look at people while listening to them
3. Use gestures and eye contact to facilitate conversational turn-taking

## #4—Listening

So often we feel unheard. Even the most powerful people can feel unheard by their team, board, assistant, or equal colleagues. This makes us feel, at best, as if we are wasting our time or are misunderstood or undervalued. At worst, it makes us frustrated, angry, and exasperated.

The first three sections listed many of the behaviors you can express to make sure those around you feel heard. Feeling heard makes people feel valued. It avoids discontent, burnout, and a lack of organizational commitment.<sup>20</sup> Whether you are really listening at full capacity or not, there are four simple nonverbal cues that signal you are listening.<sup>21</sup> First, you need to make eye contact while listening to others. More importantly, you need to make eye contact when *you* are speaking—often easily forgotten.<sup>22</sup> When we speak we are thinking hard, we are often unconsciously darting our eyes around the room, maybe looking at a wall. We must deliberately look at the person (or people) we are addressing or at each individual at the table. When others are speaking, we can engage in two nonverbal behaviors that are called “backchannel responses.” These include nodding your head up and down as if to say “yes, I get it, I understand, I hear you” and uttering affirmative paralinguistic cues such as “uh-huh” and “mmm-hmm.”<sup>23</sup> That said, too much nodding while others are speaking can be distracting—so use nodding in moderation. A little goes a long way.

The same can be said for paralinguistic cues of affirmation—they are audible to others (including the speaker) and can be distracting. So use verbal cues of affirmation quietly and judiciously. Don’t be so loud that you become a distraction. These are the tools that you can use right away to make people around you really feel heard. Don’t look at your computer or phone or down at the table when others are speaking. Don’t look at the wall or utter nothing in affirmation, either. These same exact cues—eye contact, nodding, and making affirmative paralinguistic utterances—are all signs of being *engaged*. Guess what people think of you when you seem engaged? *They think you are smarter.*<sup>24</sup> This is a prime incentive to use these cues to look like a better listener.



### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

*Listening*

1. Look at people while *listening* to them
2. Look at people while *speaking* to them
3. Nod your head as if to say “yes, I hear you and understand”
4. Utter affirmative paralinguistic cues such “uh-huh” and “mm-hmm”

## #5—Avoiding Resting “Cranky” Face

Has anyone ever seemed nervous around you and you couldn’t understand why? Do people often think you disapprove of them even when you don’t? Have you, yourself, ever felt that an audience was not exactly enraptured by the talk or speech or pitch you were giving, and yet they told you afterward



**FIGURE 1.** Two Potential Bosses.**Scrutinizer****Thinker**

George Doyle via Getty Images


how fantastic the talk was or they funded your venture? *Where was the disconnect?* In your mind? Probably not—it is probably on their faces or yours. Many of us look judgmental or upset as we sit there listening to others. Some people tend to squint their eyes—for whatever reason. Some people merely narrow their eyes and furrow their brows when *paying really close attention* to what someone is saying. But how is this *perceived*?

The problem is not what people feel inside. The problem is in what their facial physiognomy/expression is signaling. They may seem intimidating, judgmental, and disapproving. Most of us are unaware that we do this. However, if you have ever been on the receiving end of this facial expression, you certainly *felt it* and know exactly what is being described here. What can you do about it? It is a habit formed long ago. Or maybe you don't wear your glasses when you should. Or maybe it is just simply your thick dark eyebrows that you have no control over. With regard to nonverbal behavior, it is very difficult to stop engaging in a behaviors such as this—especially one that you have been expressing for many years.<sup>25</sup> There is, however, a simple solution to this apparent problem. While it is hard to *stop* a nonverbal behavior such as narrowing your eyes and furrowing your brow, it is easy to *add* one.

For example, by placing your thumb and forefinger on your chin, you alter others' perception of the *meaning* of that furrowed brow. Instead of looking intimidating and judgmental, you now appear thoughtful and engaged. All you had to do was add one tiny nonverbal behavior. Figure 1 illustrates two photos: on the left is a man with furrowed brows and squinty eyes we call the "Scrutinizer"; on the right is the same man doing the same thing with his brows and eyes, except here, he has his hand on his chin, and who we called the "Thinker." In a preliminary study, we asked 215 people from diverse ethnic backgrounds with at least a college

degree from around the United States (97 females; 118 males; the average age was 41 years old,  $SD = 11.22$ ) to make judgments of one of these photos (we did not use our labels; we merely showed participants the photograph). Participants were randomly assigned to view one of these two photos and make nine different ratings about the person they saw. The nine ratings the participants made were: Would you like him to be your boss? How thoughtful (vs. judgmental) does he seem? How mean (vs. kind) does he seem? How intelligent does he seem? Does he seem to exude self-control? Does he seem judgmental? Would he intimidate you if he were your boss? Does he seem confident? Does he seem competitive?

People rated the “Thinker” boss significantly more positively than the “Scrutinizer” boss. The data showed that narrowed eyes and furrowed brows make you seem meaner, dumber, less thoughtful, lower on self-control, more judgmental, and people would not much like to have you as their boss. However, by merely putting your hand up to your chin, you are able to transform how others perceive your facial expression. Now, as “the thinker,” people want you as their boss. They perceive you to be nicer, more thoughtful, less judgmental, higher on self-control, and more intelligent.



**TOOLKIT SUMMARY**

*Avoiding “Resting Cranky Face”*

1. “Cranky face” is hard to change; it is difficult to *stop* engaging in behaviors such as this, but simple to add one.
2. Adding one simple behavior (hand to chin) radically changes others’ perceptions from “my boss is mean and judgmental” to “my boss is nice and thoughtful”

## #6—*Power (Access to and Control over People and Resources)*

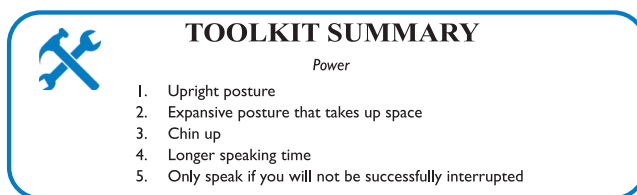
Conveying power through nonverbal behavior is easy to do—whether or not you actually have it. The question you must ask yourself is: Is it appropriate and optimal that I express power in this situation? If the answer to that question is yes, then the behaviors to express are easy to select and deploy. Expressing all of these simultaneously is likely “too much.” You will want to assess the situation you are in and express either a little nonverbal power or you may wish to express a bit more.

You also have the opportunity to match behaviors to your personality. Not all of these behaviors will suit you and you may feel or look awkward expressing them. So try them out in safe social contexts or in front of the mirror.

- Having an upright posture is perceived as more powerful. This means sitting with your back relatively straight and erect.<sup>26</sup>
- Expanding your body to take up a little more space also leads to others thinking you are more powerful.<sup>27</sup> This should be used judiciously, especially if you are a taller person—you already have a powerful appearance through height, so less can be enough to convey just a bit more power.

- Tilting your chin slightly upward is perceived by others as more powerful (and more prideful—not in a bad way, but as someone who has self-respect and is proud of their accomplishments).<sup>28</sup> You don't want to be awkward about tilting your chin up—a very slight tilt upward will be enough.
- Longer speaking time is associated with perceived power. Be careful with this behavior as it is also associated with people who can't self-regulate (i.e., they don't know when to shut up and they overly dominate conversations and important discussions). However, having something to say is critical—if you are the type to stay quiet, this can lead to perceptions of lower power. You will want to contribute something—even if you merely reflect back to the group what you just heard as a way of summarizing a discussion toward the goal of moving forward. There is always something important you can say and summarizing others' perspectives makes you seem powerful and prosocial at the same time.<sup>29</sup>
- With regard to speaking time—you only want to speak if you are sure you will not be interrupted. When others successfully interrupt you, it makes you seem less powerful. So select wisely when to speak.<sup>30</sup>

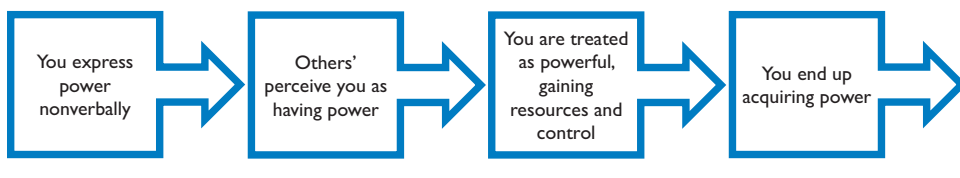
In addition to altering others' perceptions of your power through these nonverbal behaviors, you may also be on the receiving end of a benefit called a self-fulfilling prophecy—a concept also studied by Robert Rosenthal.<sup>31</sup> Figure 2 explains how the nonverbal expression of power in front of others can sometimes lead to the actual acquisition of power.



### **#7—*Status (Respect and Admiration of Others)***

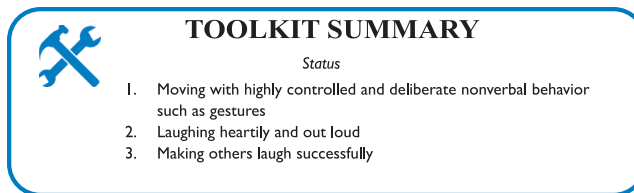
Like power, conveying status—whether or not you have it—is also fairly easy to do. There are theoretical, empirical, and practical differences between power and status.<sup>32</sup> Power is most often defined as access to and control over people and resources.<sup>33</sup> Status, conceptually different from power, is defined as the respect and admiration of others.

Possessing status tends to bring about influence and social support.<sup>34</sup> It is true that in the real world, power and status tend to go together—people with status tend to have power and vice versa. However, it need not—there are many examples of world leaders who have plenty of power but do not have the respect and admiration of others.<sup>35</sup> Scholars are continuing to break new empirical ground demonstrating ways in which power and status manifest differently.<sup>36</sup> However,

**FIGURE 2.** The self-fulfilling prophesy of nonverbally expressing power.

in the domain of nonverbal behavior, it appears that power and status manifest in similar ways.

The nonverbal behaviors you can use to increase others' perceptions of you as powerful ought to be used in a manner that suits your interpersonal style—taking from that list those behaviors that work best for you. There are two notable additions to power nonverbals that appear to almost exclusively convey status.<sup>37</sup> The behaviors that can boost others' perceptions of your status are: moving with highly controlled and deliberate nonverbal behavior such as gestures,<sup>38</sup> and using laughter—both by laughing heartily and out loud and by successfully making others laugh.<sup>39</sup>



## #8—*Intelligence*

In business, to some extent, you are an intelligence broker—deciding which ideas should be implemented, whom to hire and promote, and whom you may want to fast-track because they have “high potential.” You also want to convey intelligence as it leads to others' perceptions of your higher competence,<sup>40</sup> which can lead to others attributing more status to you.<sup>41</sup> This, of course, helps you persuade others and execute your vision because status commands the respect and admiration of others.

Thus, conveying intelligence has both direct and indirect effects—both of which are desirable. There are some easy-to-express nonverbal behaviors you can employ to increase others' perceptions of your intelligence. These behaviors are associated not only with *perceived* intelligence (i.e., how smart others *think* you are),<sup>42</sup> but also with *actual* intelligence (i.e., more intelligent people actually express these behaviors).<sup>43</sup>

These behaviors involve *engagement*. When we appear engaged with, stimulated by, and connected to what others are saying and doing, it tends to reflect our

intelligence and it shapes others' perceptions of how smart we are.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, the more you lean in (literally) to another person as you are talking, the more intelligent you seem (and tend to be). In addition, nodding your head "yes" as people speak is another indication of your interest and engagement and thus your intelligence. And finally, the affirmative paralinguistic utterances such as "mm-hmm," "yes," and "ah-hah" also signal and reflect intelligence.



### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

*Intelligence*

1. Leaning in to signal engagement
2. Nodding
3. Affirmative paralinguistic utterances such as "mm-hmm," "yes," and "ah-hah."

### **#9—Detecting Deception in Strategic and Ordinary Encounters**

Detecting deception is difficult—on average, people are only slightly better than chance<sup>45</sup> unless they have had some training in how to detect deception.<sup>46</sup> We are typically bad at detecting deception given how important it is and given that other people lie to us every single day in person, over the phone, in email, and in text.<sup>47</sup>

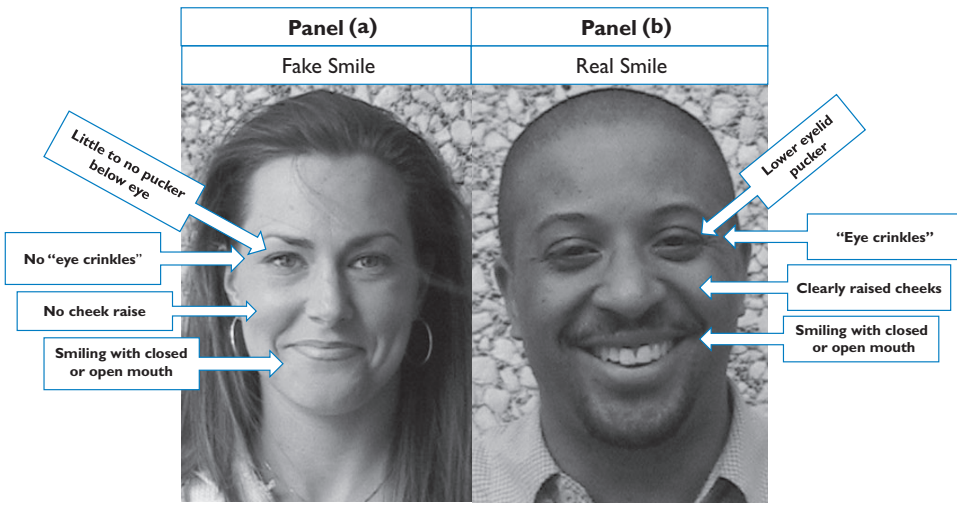
When you are in a context that is critical to having open and transparent communications, lies—regardless of how small—can damage culture, workflow, how you structure your and others' time, and your ability to function as a mentor and manager. Deceptions can be minor, but costly, such as "Yes, I understand the instructions." Other times the lies are prosocial, but fail to help you intervene to optimize a workplace, "Oh yes, he is a great colleague." And lies can be egregious and lead to a poor negotiation or a loss of profit, "Yes, I contacted the old client and he is no longer interested" or "Yes, let's work together on this; I have your best interest at heart; we have enough trust and a history of cooperation such that we don't need contracts or lawyers at this point."

The skill to detect deception is not an easy one to acquire, but it can be taught. There are a few key behavioral patterns you can pay attention to in order to get you started. Attending to these behaviors will, at minimum, help you decipher when you may wish to dig deeper, ask more questions, check in more, ask a different way, or be on guard. I call these "red flag moments." One thing to note is that when stakes are low (meaning there is no real cost to the lie nor any substantial reward), it can be very hard to tell whether someone is lying or telling the truth.<sup>48</sup> In other words, when a person lies about something inconsequential, they experience little to no fear of consequence, inner-conflict, guilt, or shame. As such, the liar does not reveal this through body language or vocal characteristics. Without some cue (verbal or nonverbal) to use when making lie/truth judgments, it can be nearly impossible to detect deception. However, most of the time we feel at least a little inner-conflict when we say something that isn't true—be it an

opinion, belief, feeling, or statement of fact. This is true whether we are committing an act of commission (making something up) or omission (leaving something out).

Here are the red flags to pay attention to. They are not clear signals that a person is lying, but rather that something may be awry. Use them as a guidepost to tell you to dig deeper, because there may be more to the story.

- *Changes in baseline behavior.*<sup>49</sup> What this means is we all have a general way of behaving—the relaxation level with which we sit, the positivity level with which we speak, and how engaged we are in conversations. If you notice that a person shifts their body around in their chair a little (or a lot) and this is atypical for them—that is a time to take notice. Or you may notice a person become slightly less warm or less positive than normal. Perhaps they will seem more nervous by touching their hair or face when they usually do not, or they may push back from the table when they are usually leaning in—engaged and alert. These are examples of a person who is acting a little differently and this is a change in baseline behavior and thus a possible red flag.
- *Fake versus real smiles.*<sup>50</sup> There are times you may wish to know if a person is truly feeling positive emotion and not “faking it.” For example, if you are in private equity or considering a merger or acquisition of some kind, knowing how well the C-suite or partners get along is of critical importance in your due diligence process. Likewise, knowing whether the employees truly enjoy (or have some organizational commitment or affection) is also of critical importance. When talking to them about each other or the firm, you should expect to see real smiles—not fake ones. A fake smile uses just the mouth—the “apple” of the cheeks do not raise up, there are no crinkles around the eyes (what are commonly referred to as “crow’s feet”), and there is no small pucker below the eye, and the smile is often closed mouth (see Panel a in Figure 3). In contrast, a real smile uses the mouth, the apple of the cheek raises up, and there are crinkles around the eyes and a pucker below the lower eyelid (see Panel b in Figure 3).
- Facial expressions of emotion that are inconsistent with the context, the rest of the body, or spoken words. When we tell the truth, there is coherence in emotion (i.e., on the positive-negative continuum) expressed across the various channels of communication including the words we say and the nonverbal behaviors we express in face and body—and all of those match the context. For example, if a person is responding to a tough, serious question, and they break a smile or laugh in an out-of-context manner while speaking seriously and somberly—that is an odd constellation: the smile or laugh is *out of context* and *not coherent* with the other cues being expressed. This is a red flag moment.
- Facial expressions that are inconsistent such that the top half of the face is expressing one emotion and the bottom half a different emotion. This is another type of inconsistency and incoherence—only in this case, it is all on

**FIGURE 3.** A Fake versus a Real Smile.

the face of the person. You may see concern or anger on the top half of the face with a furrowed brow, yet a smile on the lower half of the face. That is an atypical facial expression that does not make sense—a “true” negative expression uses the whole face. The same is true of a “true” positive expression—it uses the whole face. If you see an odd or awkward facial expression that seems split—that is a red flag.

### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

*Deception Detection: “Red Flags”*

1. Changes in baseline behavior
2. Fake versus real smiles
3. Emotional coherence across different communication channels (words, face, body)
4. Emotional coherence across lower versus upper face

### **#10—Using the Wisdom of the Crowd to Detect Others’ Thoughts, Feelings, and Intentions**

Making sense of others’ thoughts, feelings, and intentions can take up quite a bit of mental bandwidth. However, the more you practice it, the easier and more automatic it becomes (it is a bit like driving a car—at 16, you thought about every little action; now, you drive and barely think about it). As you practice your people-reading skills, you will improve your judgments: Are they powerful? Do they have the respect and admiration of their peers? Are they lying to me? However, right now (before you have time to practice) you can leverage the wisdom of a group of people immediately to help make more accurate assessments about other people.<sup>51</sup> Using a small team to make judgments of others does three things:



- The onus of making an accurate judgment is distributed among different people and each person can spend a little less cognitive energy thinking about the CEO on that conference call or the management team before you.
- You can split up duties—one person can worry about the negotiation or the asking of pointed questions or conducting the interview. Meanwhile, a small group of others can observe the interaction and make mental or physical notes about certain attributes, behaviors, or impressions.
- There is statistical value in averaging impressions. Your biases and mental errors in judgment are not the same as mine. By averaging together the impressions of a group (i.e., the “wisdom of the crowd”), your result is a more accurate assessment of a target person.



### TOOLKIT SUMMARY

#### *Wisdom of the Crowd in Accurate Perception*

1. Devote 2 more people at a road show to determine whether a CEO is being honest (pool information)
2. Use more than one analyst to listen to a conference call to detect signals of risk or low confidence (pool information)
3. Use committees to make hiring and promotion decisions and pool information before rendering a decision

## Conclusion

There is an almost secret language that managers likely already know—although it may not be consciously realized. This article clears up managers’ perception about behaviors already sensed, but just never fully understood nor used in the management of others. Some managers may not have been sufficiently aware of the importance of nonverbal behavior or had the wrong ideas about it. Our media (e.g., books, television, computers) are, sadly, full of information that is at worst patently false and at best full of opinions by non-scientists with strong intuitions (who are, on rare occasion, right).

Managers’ nonverbal behavior has a profound impact on others—how others feel about themselves, how well workers and colleagues perform, and whether or not managers’ teams feel validated and included. In addition, the cues listed here can help managers make sense of other people—especially nonverbal behaviors that are associated with both *perceived* and *actual* liking, listening, power, status, intelligence, and deception. Finally, pooling perceptions from two or more people can lead to more accurate judgments of a manager’s team or a particular individual that is being considered for hire, promotion, or even the all-to-uncomfortable punitive moment about which many managers fret.

Managers need to employ these nonverbal tools to become more effective communicators. When put into practice, these tools will help managers conduct meetings better and interact more smoothly, comfortably, and amicably with others at work. Managers must learn how to avoid unwittingly antagonizing their valued colleagues, and how to better influence and inspire their workforce.



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