



Body language: take care

TN158 Training Notes series: Management

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One of our most powerful communication tools is our own body. We send out messages by the way we look, the way we move and the way we present ourselves.

So while we give a talk to an audience or engage in a conversation with one other person, while we sit in a meeting or react to someone else's message to us, our so-called 'body language' may detract from the message we want to give or even negate it completely.

It therefore pays to be aware of the situations when we let our bodies speak louder than our words.

If you Google 'body language' you will find many examples from the commercial world, some of which are the results of impressive collections of data.

These notes focus instead on where we sometimes get it wrong in the church world. You will find no set of survey results to populate the following list. The items come from my years of observing and analysing church communication and consist of some of the common faults that arise from such. Some of them are faults that I am painfully aware I can be guilty of myself as my nearest and dearest have warned me.

So here are 12 examples of friends of mine (or me) who allow their bodies to convey messages that may even be the opposite of what they want to 'say'. A list of 'how not to's' can sometimes be more helpful than their opposites. They are in no particular order.

They are followed by a list of application areas.

These notes should prove most valuable in a group discussion setting where interpretation can play a vital role. But, first, a warning.

Beware: take great care

Some people have personality issues which mean their body language, that may seem unhelpful or rude to others, may be very much part of who they are. Others may behave in a certain way because of childhood abuse or current relationship breakdown. For still others there are ethnic cultures to bear in mind which may give different messages from traditional British expectations. So please read these note in the light of your local cultural and demographic contexts and be prepared to adjust what I say accordingly. This is a sensitive subject and one set of notes cannot deal with all possible applications.

So, now to my 12 friends.

1 Aaron preaches with hands in pockets

When speaking to a group or preaching in church, what you do with your hands is important. If both of them are in trouser or jacket pockets this detracts from the seriousness of the activity and, for many people, looks too casual as well as missing out on the opportunity to use them more to support what you are saying. Another fault for Aaron is when he folds his arms – which can suggest both control and protection from criticism. Perhaps the church might run some training sessions for up-front technique for those who lead and speak, using these notes as a basis.

2 Beryl speaks to people without eye contact

Beryl is a lovely, humble person but very shy which means she cannot bring herself to look in the faces of those she is speaking to. Instead she looks down or at her notes if speaking and drops her eyes when talking to one other person. This means people feel she is not engaging with them and she lacks relationship whether in a group or one-to-one. She needs gentle encouragement to look up from her notes when preaching and engage with her listeners rather more than she is doing at present. Of course, it might be even worse if she went to the opposite extreme and glared directly into people's eyes close up!

3 Callum likes to be right up close to you

Callum is ever so friendly but has little idea how difficult people find it when he stares hard at them and then comes right up close so that his face is almost touching theirs. Most people need a fair amount of space around them to feel comfortable, especially with someone they do not know well. This is especially important when they are unable to select reverse gear because they are caught in a corner or in a closed-end row of seats. A close friend needs to help Callum understand how he is coming across and why people who know him shy away when he approaches.

4 Divine slouches when chairing a meeting or leading a home group

Divine often stretches her feet out and lies back in her chair. She seems to be aiming to go so far as to be horizontal! The trouble is that this posture sends the whole group to sleep and takes all the sparkle and urgency from the meeting. It is worst when this happens just after lunch in a whole day session. At meetings the leader needs to be, literally, on the edge of their chair, eyes watching others' body language, very obviously being a role model of attention. Perhaps some training in handling meetings might show up this fault.

5 **Emin shakes hands with wrench-like power**

Emin is on the welcome team but regulars cringe when they see him making a beeline for a newcomer. He is only seeking to offer a welcome but it's too warm for most people. (By the way, a limp hand-shake in certain circumstances can be unwelcome too.) He also keeps touching people he has only just met. The church may need a policy on how welcomers are to approach newcomers as part of safeguarding. The welcome team might benefit from regular training, including some practice in how to shake hands in an appropriate way, and a message that hugs with strangers is not a wise way to say 'welcome'.

6 **Fran has mannerisms that others notice**

Overuse of any bodily movement or mannerisms when leading or speaking can be distracting for listeners as it can be more obvious than the spoken message being relayed. The same applies to those who walk around too much especially if with a hand-held microphone (a topic that, incidentally, deserves a separate set of notes). Some movements can be easily corrected but others need good friends to warn the speaker how she is coming across. And the topic of technique needs to be included in training sessions on presentations of any kind.

7 **Gav tends to point at people when speaking to them**

Gavin is a school teacher and pointing comes naturally to him. It's OK when making a general statement or indicating who should speak next in a group, but those he is speaking to feel uncomfortable when his forefinger points directly at them as a means of emphasis for the point (pun intended) he is making. Gav is probably unaware of this but once he realises what he is doing he needs to watch what he does with his finger. So who is going to tell Gav what he is doing without losing his friendship? Perhaps using these notes in a training session might be the best way of bringing the topic up.

8 **Hetty stands to talk to people who are sitting down**

Hetty is tall anyway but uses her height to emphasise power, as well as trapping the other person if she blocks their escape route from their pew or chair. It feels fine for her but the other person may feel trapped, uncomfortable and even belittled. It would be better if she drew up a chair and sat down beside them, or even knelt on the floor next to them and made something of a joke of this. It is all about coming down to their level, literally.

9 **Ivor's mind is elsewhere**

Ivor's mind is constantly on his list of people he wants to talk to after church so when someone not on the list speaks to him, he acts out his impatience. He gives little hint that he is listening and does not realise that it helps to smile, to nod at points he agrees with, to react to the messages he is receiving. At meetings or prayer gatherings he is too busy thinking up his next response to actively listen to the current speaker. Ivor may be a gifted administrator but needs to learn some people skills.

10 Jessie glances over the shoulder of the person she is speaking to

When in a crowd, such as over coffee at a church service, Jessie loves meeting people. But she simply cannot pay attention to anyone for long. So when talking to someone, we'll call them 'number one', she notices another person, 'number two', she would just love to meet right behind and her eyes move to over the shoulder of 'number one'. Number one, of course, notices and turns round to see who Jessie has been looking at and then realises they are no longer needed and feels deflated.

11 Kyle's face gives away his feelings

When Kyle disagrees with the speaker he is listening to, the frown on his face tells the world what he thinks of that. He sometimes makes it more obvious to those around him by an exasperated sigh or a deep yawn. This is so obvious in a church service or any business meeting. His face always gives his feelings away. Being aware of this weakness would at least be a start to solving the difficulty but it may need a close friend or partner to tell him that he is being rude.

12 Laura ... well you decide what Laura needs to correct

These examples are not exhaustive so let me leave my final friend with something you would like to add in yourself which has not been mentioned above. Perhaps it is a feature that you have been told you need to be aware of and correct. If you are working on these notes in a group setting as recommended, let the group add to the list something particularly relevant to your own cultural setting.

So, which of the above do you think you might be guilty of? Would your partner or friends agree (ask them)? I've been told which ones I need to be aware of. I'm working on them.

Scenarios where these apply include:

- **Church services**
Several of my 12 friends may be up-front leaders of worship or preachers, or even lesson readers or notice-givers. Anyone up-front may be giving messages they do not mean to and at the same time hiding their real message behind body language that shouts louder. The same applies to speakers in other contexts.
- **Small groups**
The same dangers can be apparent in the smaller scale of group meetings. These may be home groups or prayer gatherings. The faults can be more obvious when a small group is close up to each other.
- **Business meetings**
Several of these faults can be obvious in any church business meeting. Some apply to those in the chair who need to read the body language of all those taking part. Others to all who attend.
- **Other gatherings**
But it is not just meetings for business – it could be for prayer or a social occasion. Which ones of the list of 12 might this be possible in?

- **Welcome ministry**

One of the most vital areas for good body language is a church's welcome team or anyone seeking to talk to newcomers or strangers. Do your welcomers have regular training on such issues?

- **Work environment**

Church is not a work environment for most, but it is for the church staff who might do well to discuss how they may be sending wrong or unhelpful messages to each other as they work together and in staff meetings.

- **Interviews**

Those being interviewed for a staff post need to consider the body language messages they want to get right, from the initial hand-shake to eye contact with those asking the questions.

Application idea

Read these notes alongside Training Notes TN49, *What's going on under the water*, and TN94, *Becoming self-aware* on this website. Which of my 12 friends displays messages that you sense you may too? Who could help you overcome these?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN158. See also Training Notes TN49, *What's going on under the water*, and TN94, *Becoming self-aware*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN158 under Management (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>.