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# What is Your Body Saying Behind Your Back?

by Sandy Mobley

Employees are always watching you, their leaders. What are they looking for? They watch your mood – are you optimistic, worried, angry? They check to see if you really believe what you are saying. They listen for the meaning *behind* your words. If you lack conviction, it will show in body language, but you might not have a clue. It could be overt like a colleague shaking his head from side to side while saying, “Yes.” It could be harder to put a finger on like your boss saying, “This merger will be good for both companies.” And although you can’t pinpoint anything specific, the words just don’t ring true.



We have all been taught to be aware of body language, but we don’t always read it correctly. The introductory books on the subject say if someone crosses her arms, she is closed or defensive—but perhaps she is nervous or feels more comfortable with her arms crossed. There may be much more to her story than this one-dimensional interpretation, and it can be understood only by accounting for emotions and words in addition to body language.

Communication between humans is complex, subliminal, multi-layered. Just as body language alone can’t tell you everything, neither can words alone. By varying the tone and tempo of your voice, you could express the statement “you got the job” with joy, sarcasm, anger, disbelief, or no emotion at all. And you could do it all with or without crossing your arms.

If you ever succeeded in doing business in a foreign country without speaking the language, you know that communication is multi-dimensional. But what you may not realize is that aspects of communication that you thought were working may in fact be hindering your ability to be understood.

## Diagnosing Alignment Gaps

The field of somatics examines the connections among body, emotions, and language. When all three are aligned, your behavior is visibly authentic. When not aligned, your messages ring false to your audience as well as your subconscious. Some part of ourselves feels off, even though we can’t identify the cause. Imagine a CEO watching the Union shut down his plant and saying to the press through clenched teeth, “It takes more than a strike to upset me.” Those words do little to ease the leader’s stress and in fact may aggravate it further, leading to greater mismatches among body, emotion, and language. How can we recognize when our bodies and emotions are aligned with our messages? And, when they are not in sync, how can we bring them into alignment?

One way to diagnose an alignment gap is to examine how the world responds to you. When you communicate, do people understand? When you make requests, do others take action? Do people want to work for you and with you? Do you feel effective in the world? If you answered “no” or “sometimes,” your language, emotions, and body



are most likely out of alignment. There may be inconsistency, for example, in what you say and *how* you say it. The woman who unconsciously smiles broadly when denying a co-worker's request sends a mixed message, yet she wonders why people don't take her denial seriously. Her body is talking louder than her words, and it is contradicting what she says.

If you want to send clear messages, it is important to learn what story your body is telling. After all, while everyone else reads our body language and emotions, we are often in the worst position to see them ourselves.

### **"She does great work, but ...."**

Laura is a principal at a top tier consulting firm. I began coaching her when she was "finally being considered" to become a partner. For several years Laura had been told, "You aren't quite ready yet. Be patient." She was growing angry and bewildered that the firm had yet to recognize and reward her talent and experience. When I spoke with the firm's partners, I also had a hard time understanding why her promotion wasn't "in the bag." She met all the formal criteria – selling a tremendous amount of work, delivering on time and profitably, building a stellar team, developing and promoting her people, and modeling all the organizational success qualities for leadership, integrity, and collaboration. But the partners said vaguely that she lacked leadership presence without providing any specifics. When pushed they finally admitted, "I don't know exactly, but something is off."

I decided to observe Laura's interactions with others to uncover the problems the partners couldn't explain and she herself couldn't see. I asked Laura if I could facilitate one of her planning meetings and she agreed. We defined the agenda and intended

outcomes. The goal of the meeting was to develop a strategy that the whole team agreed on to land a new account. At the beginning of the meeting I was struck by Laura's erect stance, direct eye contact, and athletic build. She appeared confident and polished, with an easy laugh and warm smile that lit up her face. With four peers and six subordinates in attendance, Laura kicked off the session, setting a relaxed and confident tone. She joked and they bantered back. She smoothly transitioned into inviting participants to share what they knew about the target organization, its leaders, market strategy, and competitors. Laura listened attentively to each person. The group members treated each other with respect, waiting for one person to finish before speaking. Next, they brainstormed possible offerings for the organization. As expected, Laura was fast and prolific in generating ideas, and her enthusiasm ignited a creative spark that generated more ideas from other participants. Everything I saw pointed to Laura's exceptional leadership ability.

As the brainstorming options were narrowed, two ideas emerged: Laura's and one of her peers. When the group seemed to favor the peer's idea, Laura explained hers again. That's when I noticed her posture shift. She began to lean forward while holding her chin up and looking down her nose. Her voice became higher and louder and her jaw was tight – not just tight, but locked and loaded. The room grew tense. When one



person expressed a concern, she cut him off, reiterating her position. Another person jumped in to support him, but Laura retorted, “If you had bothered to study the data, you’d realize that idea is irrelevant.” The team’s stimulating creative energy drained away. Participants stared at the table. The room grew silent.

I called for a break in the meeting and pulled Laura aside. “What’s going on?” I asked. She said she was frustrated because their idea wouldn’t work – she’d been through it before. “They’re just wasting time!”

I reminded her of her goal for the *whole team* to agree on a strategy to win the account. “How are you doing toward that goal?” I asked. “And, how do you think the team feels about you?”



Laura’s eyes narrowed and her jaw was clenched as she looked down her nose. “They just don’t get it. But what would I know, I’ve *only* led thirty successful new client wins,” she said sarcastically.

I asked her to recall how the meeting had begun and what she thought about her team members as they plunged into the task. Remembering how enthusiastic and happy she had felt to be working with such a strong group, her eyes softened, her jaw relaxed, and she let out a deep sigh.

It became clear to me what was getting in Laura’s way. When she was “up,” Laura could take a team from zero to sixty miles an hour in seconds, but when she was “down” or disheartened, she could squash their motivation with a single look. Since she couldn’t see what her team saw, I dem-

onstrated it for her and asked her what she noticed. I squinted my eyes, tightened my jaw and looked down my nose as I haughtily said, “My idea is based on the experience of thirty wins; let’s not waste time with other ideas.”

“I come across like that?” she asked. I nodded. She was quiet for a few minutes as she recalled numerous similar situations.

Under normal conditions, Laura was easy to work with and brought out the best in her team. But, when her ideas were challenged or dismissed, she put others on the defensive or shut them down all together. Because she didn’t behave this way often, it was hard for people to recognize this pattern, and it left them feeling uneasy when they thought about working with her.

Laura is smart and driven to succeed, so her ideas are rarely dismissed. But on those rare occasions when they are, she feels her talents are not being recognized and it feeds her resentment over not being promoted. Her reaction can be quick and vicious — and devastating to her career. Her desire to be acknowledged drives her to be great, but it also holds her back when she doesn’t get the recognition she seeks.

To break this pattern, Laura needed to recognize how she was feeling *before* she erupted into behavior that put others off. This is where somatic principles can help her identify alignment gaps among her words, emotions, and body language and then adjust her response before making a show-stopping comment.

First she needed to slow down. Because of her high energy and strong influence skills, one wrong move on her part could push the whole team over a cliff. By slowing down enough to examine a situation, she could see

the impact she had on others and act accordingly.

Going slower often amounts to paying attention to breathing. When Laura breathed deeply into her body until her breath reached her belly, she felt calmer and more confident. And when she was calm, she didn't overreact. Because we aren't typically conscious about our breathing, I gave Laura practices of taking time outs and noticing how she was breathing. Recognizing that breath high in the chest increases anxiety motivated Laura to take deeper breaths. And with that she felt more confident. She had a strong and loyal team and she actually enlisted them in helping her recognize when she was coming on too strong. With their assistance and her willingness to change, she was promoted to partner with enthusiastic support.

### **"You're a nice guy, but...."**

Randy, a senior associate at a technology consulting firm, has a blend of exceptional technical, consulting and interpersonal skills. Though he had been with the organization for six years, he seemed unable to get promoted. Because the organization had been downsizing in the last year, there were even fewer advancement opportunities, and Randy felt his best career move was to look elsewhere. He had no trouble getting interviews, usually ending up among the top two or three candidates, but he wasn't landing any offers. He asked me to help him with his interviewing skills.

The first thing I noticed when I met Randy was his warm smile and cherubic face. On his 6'2" frame, it was quite disarming. As I studied his stance, I noticed that his posture was hunched and bent over, as if he had been riding in a Mini-Cooper for too long.

Also, for his size, his handshake seemed anemic.

When we sat down, I saw that he slumped in the chair. I learned that he grew up in an upper-middle class family in Georgia, had gone to prep schools, and had an Ivy League college education. He was married and looking forward to starting a family, so advancing his career was important. Thoughtful and articulate, he had even published several technical articles on computer security. With his slight Southern accent, the best word to describe Randy would be *genteel*.

Randy told me about a recent job interview



that had involved six peers and the hiring manager. He said the conversations had gone well; his background seemed to be exactly what they were looking for. He expected to get an offer but was surprised when the manager called and said they had chosen

someone else. This was the third time this had happened and he couldn't understand what he was doing wrong. I asked him whether he had requested any feedback from the manager about his candidacy.

"No," he said, looking at me quizzically. "That never occurred to me. I don't think I'd feel comfortable asking that."

"Why would it be uncomfortable?" I asked.

Randy had been turning his head slightly to the side as we talked, making only brief eye contact. When I asked the last question, he

looked completely away and down. “It feels impolite to put them on the spot like that.” I asked Randy what requests he had made of his current boss for a promotion or for feedback on why he hadn’t been promoted? He admitted he had only jokingly asked if he would be the company’s oldest senior associate.

“Does your boss even really know you want a promotion?” I asked. “Have you made it absolutely clear?”

Randy thought if he worked hard, kept the clients happy, was a good team member, and didn’t make waves, he’d be assured a promotion. I suggested he look at the situation from his boss’s point of view. “If you had two equally good employees and one pressed you for promotion and the other didn’t, which would you promote?”

“I never thought about it that way,” Randy admitted, “that my lack of directness may be keeping me from getting promoted.” I asked Randy to call the last manager who hadn’t hired him and request feedback. “It may feel uncomfortable,” I acknowledged, “but what do you have to lose? He already turned you down.” Randy called him for feedback and couldn’t have been more surprised at what he learned.

“You have strong experience and wonderful interpersonal skills,” the hiring manager told him. “We all really liked you. But in our business, customers sometimes push too far and we didn’t feel like you would be able to push back. That can cost us time and money when we do more than the client is paying for.”

That feedback came as a surprise to Randy. “In my current job, I have to do just that while keeping strong client relationships,” he explained “I’m good at doing it, so what

was it that made him think I couldn’t do it?” He added with astonishment, “He thinks I’m a *wimp*.” I asked Randy to tell me about a time when he pushed back and to describe exactly what he did.

Randy immediately had an example: “On the last project, the client, Sue, waited until the last minute to give assignments and I always stayed late to do them. Then one day I heard a colleague say he couldn’t stay late and she said, ‘That’s ok, I’ll get Randy to do it.’ At that point I realized I was being too accommodating and Sue was taking advantage of me.”

As he recalled this event, Randy’s back became so straight I thought his backbone had turned to steel and his direct eye contact was intense. “What did you say to her?” I asked.

“I said that she should not mistake my affability for weakness. Even though I’m a team player, I’m not a fool. And, you know what, she apologized and never gave me a last-minute assignment again.”

I realized that Randy let things go for too long before taking action and that he rarely if ever pushed back as a first response. “What kept you from speaking up before?” I asked.

“Well, it takes a lot to get me angry,” he answered, “but once I’m there, I can be tough. I want to be careful not to intimidate people.”

I asked him if anyone ever told him that he was overpowering. I expected to hear a story about an early job experience, but instead Randy related a story from childhood that has stayed with him for decades.

“Between my height and my booming voice, I can be a terror,” he explained. “As a kid, I

used to intimidate my cousins. We played army and I was the general. I made them eat dirt and I tied them to trees until they cried. One day my father found out. He was angry and said that gentlemen do not use their size or power to intimidate others. I was so ashamed that I had disappointed him.”

His father’s comment about being a gentleman was solid advice, and Randy clearly had taken it to heart, perhaps to an extreme. I suggested that Randy might be able to use his strength in a non-threatening way when interviewing. Surely his size could convey confidence and control, not just brute power.

For the next few months we worked on improving Randy’s posture and eye contact, calibrating between being a slumped-over door mat and an overbearing military general. During interview role play scenarios, we fine-tuned his posture to convey confidence and strength, while allowing his charm and genteel nature to show through. In his new job, he displays confidence and is nobody’s pushover.

## **Coaching can help**

Somatic coaching typically requires several face-to-face sessions to diagnose body-emotion-language misalignment, trace its cause, and develop techniques to bring behavior into alignment. We work together to determine what feelings trigger ineffective behavior and then create ways of recognizing when and how these emotions are set off and find more effective ways to express them. For Laura and Randy, the time was well spent. They achieved their immediate goals, and they now have an ability to more accurately see and hear themselves as others see and hear them. When you consider that we all have alignment gaps that limit our effectiveness, you gain an even greater appreciation of somatic coaching’s power to increase awareness and capacity to change. And, isn’t it better to get feedback from someone who is your advocate and wants you to succeed than from others who may not be on your side? A somatic coach helps you identify and shift the inconsistencies in how you show up, and eventually helps you see them for yourself. If you aren’t getting the responses from the world that you want, talk to a somatic coach and find out what your body is saying behind your back.

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**About the author...** Sandy Mobley is a master somatic coach, certified by the Strozzi Institute. She works with managers and executives to develop greater leadership presence by letting their bodies talk for them in the way they intend.

With an MBA from Harvard and masters degree in mathematics and computer science, she understands the unique challenges leaders face in the business world, and knows the value they can bring to an organization when they have impact. Sandy has been working with leaders in Fortune 50 organizations, major associations, and government for over twenty years. Her expertise is in individual and team coaching, organization development and training, especially in the areas of leadership and change.



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