



Speaking with Confidence: Posture & Stance

Have you ever considered how quickly audience members start to form opinions of a speaker? Many public speaking experts will tell you that audience members start to form an opinion in the first minute of a presentation. Some experts, including Bert Decker, in his book, *You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard*, indicate that opinions are formed by audience members in a few seconds. Michael Argyle and colleagues found that all types of nonverbal cues, especially body posture, had 4.6 times the effect of verbal cues (*The communication of superior and inferior attitudes by verbal and nonverbal signals. British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology. 9 (3):222-231*). Yep, nonverbal communication is **really** important. It is critical to communicate confidence to really get your message across.

This series of posts, *Speaking with Confidence*, will discuss the key physical skills of presentation delivery, the skills which have an exaggerated effect on the audience's perception of the speaker and message. We will examine posture and stance; eye contact; projection, tone and volume; gestures; and movement.

Let's start with my favorites--posture and stance. A common question is, "How should I stand?" You have probably seen everything, including speakers hiding behind podiums, standing with crossed legs and/or arms, standing rock still with arms behind their back, and everything in between. So, how should you stand? A good rule of thumb is to use the 'neutral stance.' This means standing straight and tall, with your feet about shoulder width apart (or slightly less), with your arms down at your sides. Standing with good, straight posture looks professional. Slouching may communicate disinterest.

Keeping your weight evenly balanced gives the perception of confidence. Feet or legs crossed often communicates uncertainty to the audience. Balancing on one leg can also be a problem. I once was well into a talk, balancing mostly on one leg, with the other a bit out in front of me. I was a little nervous, and ended up slipping off my shoe during the talk. Eek! I want to help you avoid mistakes I've made.

The final element of the neutral stance is what to do with your hands and arms. Try putting your arms down at your sides, in between gesturing. It seems uncomfortable at first. Keep trying! It's a professional, confident look. Oh, and one last thing--don't give in to the temptation to put your hands in your pockets (guys) or hold on to the front edge of your jacket (ladies). These look too casual and not confident.

What about holding something in your hand? Well, ok, if you don't have a death grip on it. The real issue with holding something is that you may begin unconsciously playing with the item. I



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once held on to a green flip chart marker for dear life, until I looked down and noticed I'd succeeded in turning my entire hand green. Again, not very professional! Another time I was clutching an automatic advancer for my projector. I didn't realize I'd been playing with it in my hand until the batteries fell out--right in the middle of my talk. Oops! If you tend to mess around with something in your hand, don't hold it! You can pick up the automatic advancer, advance to the next slide, and then set it down until you are ready to advance again.

The bottom line is that the believability of your message will be vastly improved if you *look* confident. Try it! At first, you will not feel confident. However, if you *look* confident, eventually you will *feel* confident while speaking.

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