

SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders
Have Expressive Control**



GREAT LEADERS HAVE EXPRESSIVE CONTROL

“ When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another, a practiced [person] relies on the language of the first.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

When leaders prepare for important conversations, they often focus on what to say rather than how to say it. However, it's important to consider nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication includes eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. These things can be used to provide emphasis, convey emotion, and change how a message is perceived by others. For example, nonverbal expressions can emphasize the meaning of the verbal expression (e.g., indicating size, or numbering points). They can also be used to build relationships (e.g., shaking hands). Leaders can use nonverbal communication to influence followers, build trust, give directions, and inspire performance. Research has shown that some followers feel closer to leaders who use positive hand gestures (e.g., open palms) than negative or no hand gestures.¹

Effective leaders control the way their emotions are expressed nonverbally to achieve productive outcomes. They may display a range of emotions, but they align their emotional expression with the context of the situation. For example, to convey the gravity of a situation they may use a serious expression, slow pace of speech, and limit the movement of their hands. However, in more relaxed or cheerful situations, they may smile, laugh, or gesture more, and use an upbeat tone to motivate others.

To assess your ability to use expressive control effectively, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I often think about my posture, gestures, and expressions when I am talking?
- Am I looking to others for guidance on how to act when I'm unsure?
- Do I usually make eye contact when I talk to people?
- Along with what to say, do I practice my gestures and body language for presentations?

Improve Your Expressive Control

Understand your tendencies: Expressive control doesn't mean being completely emotionless. In fact, sharing emotions can be a great way to relate to coworkers. To understand what "control" means for you, look at your current habits. Do others tend to have a hard time knowing what you are thinking or feeling? If so, expressive control may mean showing more

emotions through your face, hands, and voice. However, if others tend to respond negatively to your emotions, try to be more intentional about which emotions you display and when.

Mirror others: In some social situations it can be difficult know what reactions are appropriate. In these situations, it can be helpful to observe the response of others, then mirror them. If you have a co-worker who seems particularly skilled in this area, they can serve as a good reference for you. For example, if someone is telling a story to a group and you aren't sure what expressions to display in reaction to their story (e.g., surprise, excitement), you can see how others are responding and take cues from them on how you'd like to express yourself.

Authoritativeness does not fit every situation: Leaders often feel pressure to express authority in front of their followers. However, studies have shown that this may not be the best policy. Leaders who display excessive dominance through their nonverbal behaviors may discourage followers from participating in discussions² and may be perceived as less compassionate.³ You can encourage more participation by using emotional expressions that are welcoming to others. In teamwork situations, try to strike a collaborative tone by using a questioning rather than assertive voice and letting others speak before you.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Control Your Expressions:

The following steps can help you become better at controlling your expressions:

- 1. Illustrate your points with gestures.** Gestures can help listeners better understand a story or idea. They can help visually demonstrate a concept (e.g., drawing a circle in the air shows grouping) and maintain listeners' interest by drawing their eyes to movement. To capture, rather than distract your listeners' attention, stick to one or two gestures that best illustrate the point you are trying to make.
- 2. Adapt to differences in emotional expression.** Leaders should acknowledge the unique ways their team and clients express themselves. For one person, crossed arms signal resistance, while for another, it may only mean that they are cold. Cultural differences should be considered as well. Eye contact, for example, may convey confidence and professionalism in the West, but in cultures like Japan too much eye contact can be considered disrespectful.⁴ If communicating in a Western context, aim for four to five seconds of sustained eye contact before looking elsewhere. In other cultural contexts, be mindful of people who seem uncomfortable with a sustained gaze.
- 3. Practice the nonverbal content.** Most leaders already practice the *verbal* content of their presentations. Why not also begin practicing the *nonverbal* content? By reviewing and modifying your body language, you can ensure that your nonverbal actions match the verbal message you are trying to convey. Think of a boring presentation you once watched and compare it to one you found engaging. Besides the content, what did the speakers do differently? Once you have identified those differences, you can try to emulate the mannerisms in your own presentation.

Resources



[Take Control of Your Nonverbal Communication](#)



[Your Body Language Speaks For You in Meetings](#)



Develop your ability to control your expressions by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Talley, L., & Temple, S. (2015). How leaders influence followers through the use of nonverbal communication. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 36(1), 69-80.

² Locke, C. C., & Anderson, C. (2015). The downside of looking like a leader: Power, nonverbal confidence, and participative decision-making. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 58, 42-47.

³ Remland, M. (1984). Leadership impressions and nonverbal communication in a superior-subordinate interaction. *Communication Quarterly*, 32(1), 41-48.

⁴ Uono, S., & Hietanen, J. K. (2015). Eye contact perception in the West and East: A cross-cultural study. *PLOS One*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118094>