

Developing personal presence in a group

Article by Bernard Ross (director of =mc) following the FINZ conference, New Zealand & IoF National Convention, UK – 2008

Whether you call it a presentation or a pitch, being able to stand up and convince a *number* of people at the same time to support you is a key skill for anyone keen to display presence. We can define a pitch as a meeting of an individual and a group, where the individual presents a message in a persuasive manner in order to achieve a desired outcome from the other. More simply it's an opportunity to sell your ideas or project.

The key challenges in a group situation versus one-to-one are:

- you have to quickly build rapport with a range of communications styles
- you may need to identify and meet a range of different interests
- you need to manage the structure in a group situation much more than in a one to one
- when you hand over to the 'audience' you may have to deal with positive and negative feedback

How do we send and receive information?

People can never really know our innermost thoughts and feelings. And we can never really experience theirs. Therefore we can only really gain and share information through various channels by which we receive and transmit information. The signals we send about ourselves and our views are composed of three key channels:

- words
- voice
- body language

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These same three channels are also the basis on which we form views about other people: whether we think they're being truthful, whether we think they feel confident, etc. There has been a significant amount of research into the relative impact of these three channels. Most notable among the researchers has been Professor Albert Mehrabian of UCLA. His research, based on a careful series of metrics, established that the *relative* impact of the three channels was as indicated below:

- Words 7%
- Voice 38%
- Body language 55%

Note that his careful research is often misquoted and misunderstood. It does *not* mean that the words are unimportant. What it does mean is that the words – the most important bit since they carry the message – can be damaged when the body language and voice are 'out of sync'.

When they are 'out of sync' we experience a phenomenon called 'cognitive dissonance.' In this the voice or body language undermines or works against the meaning of the words. If you think about it, the ratio of the channels is 55:38:7 – that's roughly 8:5:1 which means that the body language is eight times more powerful. So if the body language and voice *underpin* the words, they become incredibly powerful and we experience the person as being sincere and authentic. Depending on what body language and voice they use, they could also be passionate, calm, angry or relaxed.

We can, of course, alter the relative importance of these by altering our behaviour or by reducing the amount of data we send through each of these channels. So for example:

- if your talking to someone on the telephone you don't have access to their body language: so words and voice become more important
- if you're just working on paper or e-mail then the words acquire an extremely high level of importance (just think about how many emails are misunderstood!)

Key differences

When you're presenting to a group of people, you have to manage a number of key elements. In our experience there are five key elements you need to consider. These are:

- body language
- timing
- speech rate
- gestures
- eye contact

Let's go through these one at a time.

Body language

There are challenges when pitching or presenting to group. For a start, you have to accept that by standing up and making a presentation you are separating yourself from the group. So while you can have *rapport*, it's not quite the same as when you're matching one-to-one.

One key consideration is that if you're going to convince people to treat you seriously you need to avoid *cognitive dissonance*.

Cognitive dissonance is when you unconsciously undermine the words you use with inappropriate, non-matching body language. You can create this dissonance regardless of whether you're telling the truth or lying.

Let's look at telling the truth. Some years ago we were asked to undertake an organisational review for a probation service in London. The staff were nervous. They had heard that consultants had been hired. Worse still a rumour was going round that the phrase 'organisational review' was management code for 'redundancy programme'. Hearing of this nervousness, the head of the service offered to introduce us to the 100+ staff at a meeting. He was keen to reassure them about the purpose and scope of our project. He stood up and began to speak. The speech went something like this:

"Today I'm – er – glad – er – that you've all come to this meeting. I – er– know – er– that some of you are worried that – er– there will –um– will be redundancies. Don't worry at all. The consultants – er, mmm– are going to look for things to review. And they're almost certainly... sorry *absolutely* certainly... well, pretty much [cough] – er, mmm – not going to recommend redundancies."

As he spoke he paced around the room. He looked down at the floor or up to the ceiling. He shook and wrung his hands like Uriah Heep in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. He coughed. He played with his glasses, obsessively taking them on and off. It wasn't good. And we could see the staff becoming more anxious not less.

In fact, he was being completely honest. And if you read the *text* of his presentation you'd find he had given a pretty cast iron reassurance that our project wasn't anything to be worried about. But his inappropriate body language and the verbal rambling undermined the clear and simple message designed – ironically – to reassure. This is cognitive dissonance. The essentially positive *message* contained in the words was completely undermined by the *medium* – the body language and what we call 'non words' (um, er, etc.). Cognitive dissonance in action.

Cognitive dissonance *can* also occur when someone is lying. The challenge is that some popular body language books have oversimplified and under-interpreted certain common

actions. For example, people often touch their noses or scratch inappropriately when they are nervous. A poorly researched body language book would say, 'When people scratch their nose while talking they're lying.' As an absolute *that is not true*. The touching or itching that happens when we're nervous is a *physiological response* to anxiety, and is due to blood flowing to the surface of the skin. Being nervous is not necessarily a sign of lying. However, it *is* true that people who know nothing about 'cognitive dissonance' or who aren't body language gurus, will feel a subconscious concern about a speaker who touches their nose while saying something important.

It doesn't matter if you're lying or simply anxious, if you do something that undermines the message your audience will experience, consciously or unconsciously, the gap between what you say and what your body language is suggesting to them. Nose scratching is only one example. Looking away as you say, "Of course I care," is another.

Lying is, in general, *a bad thing*. But sometimes in influence situations you want to conceal your true feelings because they're not appropriate or helpful... For example, you might want to conceal that you feel cheated off this particular morning because you had an unpleasant row with a man in a shop on the way to the meeting. A group of donors is fairly unlikely to care about your personal problems. You might want to tell your partner that the garment they've just bought looks great when really you're not at all sure it does – but you are certain that giving a positive steer is the right thing to say. Or you might want to reassure your mother that she gave you a great birthday present when it was terrible.

Posture

Part of the secret of avoiding cognitive dissonance is *good posture* – the way you hold yourself and stand. Your body is the element of you that your audience sees and experiences the most. Whatever the size, it provides the greatest amount of information about you and how you feel about you and them. And whether you like it or not, in a

presentation it's data gleaned from your body language that your audience uses to form their initial opinion of you. That's why posture is so incredibly important.

We assume you *should* stand. While we're all in favour of relaxed situations, our experience suggests that by standing you signal the element of distance you from the group and formality you to make a presentation or pitch. Otherwise you're having a meeting. By standing you signal you want to control the flow of information for a period of time. Then when you sit down you can signal the reverse, that the power is with them to ask to questions or challenge what you've said.

Look around any group of people standing up. You'll see that they all stand in slightly different ways, but that there are patterns. Some stand leaning on one leg, others with their feet together. Some clasp their hands together and some wave them around. Everyone has a preferred or default way of standing or holding ourselves. And for many of us the challenge is that our default way of standing may not be appropriate or helpful for the kind of image we want to project. Interestingly a number of these differences are gender based. Men, when they're feeling nervous, will often respond to their anxiety by adopting a 'strong' pose with legs quite far apart, toes pointing out. This can have a rather military air. And that may not be appropriate for the audience you're working with. Women on the other hand often adopt a more passive 'pleasing' stance. Typically this might involve standing with feet quite close together, head tilted on one side and clasping hands in front. This can look a little childlike. Both of these postures are inappropriate if you want to be regarded a strong sensible adult.

The ideal position is called the neutral or ready position and if you're making a pitch or presentation we suggest you adopt it. It's important to say this is a position we've tested worldwide, and everywhere it seems to convey an impression of self-confidence without arrogance or apology.

When you first start to use it, the neutral position can feel weird and unnatural. However, it has a good pedigree being similar to the basic posture used in Tai Chi, known as 'touching the earth'. And, as with the Tai Chi position, it does indeed make you feel *grounded*. This is not a position to stay in through the whole presentation – you can move! But if you adopt it at the beginning of the presentation, it will help to steady your nerves (and make you appear confident). And if you return to it after completing a gesture or movement it will give the gesture or movement more definition – and more impact.

Getting into neutral:

- *Stand, and stand upright:* it's important to stand for the two reasons we've mentioned. One is to separate yourself from the group you're pitching too. After all, you are claiming the right to get them to listen to you. The other is that by standing you give the audience maximum access to the 55% information that your body offers. *Adopt the neutral/ready position:* stand with your weight evenly balanced, and your feet parallel, about 18 inches apart and in line with your shoulders. This posture gives you a sense of being grounded. If the feet are closer together you can end up being off balance. Further apart, and you can appear slightly aggressive.
- *Move your upper body and keep your lower body still:* we gain the impression of commitment and energy from upper body movement. So feel free to move from your waist up, but below that try to keep still. In this way you give the impression of being dynamic but centred. Try it and see. And watch 'dynamic' TV presenters or singers – they often look as though they're moving a lot, but they're actually staying still in their lower body.

Let's be clear. We're not saying you need to stay stock still. You can – and indeed should – move. Good, purposeful movement is helpful to you and your audience – for instance, to engage a different section of the audience, or to move towards an audiovisual aid, or to change tone or pace.

But the movement must *be* purposeful *and* appropriate rather than unconscious pacing or jiggling on the spot. As you'd expect, we have some principles for *movement* to complement those for posture:

- ***Claim the space***: this is a phrase borrowed from acting. Actors say the hardest thing to do is to walk onto an empty stage and stand in the middle as though you had perfect right to be there. It's the key skill you have to learn. There's a similar process for you as a presenter. When you move into a space – for example, to present to a board or committee sitting in a U-shape layout of tables – move confidently to the most open and exposed space available, as though you own it. Then you've claimed the space.
- ***Use GPS (Great Presence Spots)***: identify three or four key spaces in the room. Make these your GPS locations. Give each of these places or positions a role or function. For example, when we're coaching people to influence in a group, we'll usually suggest they work on having a 'serious' spot, a 'funny' spot, and a 'visionary' or 'hopeful' spot. That means that when you have a particular type of message you deliver it from the appropriate spot. Try it. Rather like Pavlov and his dogs, after a while you can 'train' your audience to be ready for something serious or funny or aspirational just by standing in the right spot.
- ***Practice WST (Walk, Stop, and Talk)***: try to avoid talking *while* you walk. By all means walk to one of your GPS places and then say something. If you talk *while* you walk you run the risk of trying to communicate when you're actually facing away from a key decision-maker or internal influencer. This makes it very difficult to judge (and impossible to spot their reaction). The rule is simple. *Walk* in silence to the spot from where you want to communicate your next message. *Stop* and re-engage with the audience. Then *talk* to share your message. It might seem like a long time between moves but there are huge benefits to be gained by *not saying anything*.

Finally, don't forget that you may need to display presence in unfamiliar surroundings. It's much better if you can familiarise yourself with the space you'll be present in before hand. Try to find out in advance what the layout and setup will be since then you'll be

able to mentally rehearse for that. Even if you can't do that, it's essential that as you set up, you make a mental note of the floor space available and the placement of any 'obstacles' such as flipchart stands, or random pieces of office/boardroom furniture, etc. It really is worth doing this.

Impact through gestures

Body posture offers the people you're talking to a strong overall impression of how you feel about yourself and them. *Gestures* are a more specific aspect of body language using hand and other body movements to reinforce your messages or ideas. They work best when they're used for emphasis at key points. A strong and well-chosen gesture stays in the mind far longer than purple prose, which makes it a very powerful communication tool.

We all do a certain amount of gesturing normally. And you should of course keep this 'normal' gesturing when you're talking. We're talking here about deciding to reinforce one or more key ideas or messages through conscious use of your hands. This kind of *impactful gesture* is achieved through a three-stage approach:

- *Decide* on a key point that would benefit from gesture reinforcement. Plan it. Rehearse it. Be ready to repeat the gesture when you repeat the point.
- *Magnify* it: make it much bigger than in normal conversation. Push the envelope. If you pay attention to the audience they will tell you when it's too big.
- *Hold it*: for emphasis, and to plant it in the audience's mind, keep the gesture going for longer than it may feel comfortable to you.

There are two different kinds of gestures that we tend to use when communicating – *sells* and *tells*.

Sells gestures: as the name suggests, these are gestures that 'sell' ideas, or help to make a notion or concept more concrete. So the artistic director of a theatre might say to

a staff meeting after an exceptionally poor run of productions “We have to fight our way back to the top of the league in terms of artistic quality.” He might accompany that metaphor by beginning with a very low gesture with the left hand. And then he would make a more sweeping movement with the right hand upwards towards where the imaginary ‘artistic’ target at the top of the league is. Use *sell/s* sparingly in your presentation. But use them. Make them specific. And don’t be afraid to repeat them maybe even when you’ve moved on in the presentation. Back to our artistic director: “So how can we get back to the top of the league? [*repeat gesture*] Let me tell you my plan...”

Tells gestures: again as the name suggests are those which express feelings about ourselves to the audience we’re speaking to. So the classic open arm gesture that accompanies “Welcome” is a *tell*. The spread open arms signals to the audience our openness and willingness to engage with the other people there. You can also touch yourself (especially with one hand flat against the chest) to express feelings. Notice how often people do this when, for example, they say how sorry they were to hear about, say, your mother’s illness. This self-touching is connected to our kinaesthetic system. So our artistic director might say: “I have to admit I’m anxious.” And touch himself on the chest. And then go on to say, “I need your help. All of you,” at the same time as pointing around the room to various individuals. He’s using a series of ‘tell’ gestures.

Whenever you’re planning to make a presentation or pitch follow these three simple rules for gestures:

- Decide what your *key messages* are and consider having a *specific gesture* that matches the idea you’re going to sell.
- Practice these gestures in advance. This won’t make you fake or inauthentic. It will make you appear more in control and professional.
- Be sparing with the really big gestures. It’s not necessary to have a gesture for every idea – you’re not audio describing for a hearing impaired audience nor miming.

Eye contact

Eye contact is a very important part of the non-verbal communication package. And it's very important indeed in rapport. You *should* make eye contact. (Though be aware the rules for eye contact are slightly different if you're making a presentation than in a one-to-one setting.) Eye contact is one of the main indicators of your level of confidence, and can make or break your pitch. But there are many myths about the one right way to do it.

Actually eye contact is a bit of a misnomer. Most people use the phrase when they really mean 'gaze' – that is, the way in which we look at others and they look back at us. People use 'gaze' in different ways and for different reasons and in different amounts.

It seems a pretty tall order to match the eye contact preferences of every individual in a group, but it *is* possible, at least in a group up to 15. The secret of success is to focus (pardon the pun) on them. Engage with the group as a set of individuals. And rather than thinking about how nervous *you* feel, put your energy into watching them and noticing how they are responding to your arguments. As you look at each person, you will discover that they will signal to you how they feel about what you're saying. And you'll find out how much eye contact they want by their blinking. When they blink... move on to someone else.

In a big group presentation – over 50 people – you can manage rapport and impact by using a different approach to eye contact. Essentially you have to look at a 'chunk' of the audience as you make a specific point. It doesn't normally matter which chunk you look at for the point. But make it, move, look at a different chunk of the audience and move on. For the time you're looking at a particular chunk of the audience, all the people in

that chunk will feel that you are looking at them and that will make them feel important. One of the easiest ways to do this is to look, methodically, for the 'Lady in Red.' Basically, look for someone – woman or man – wearing something red. Focus on them and share your key point. All the audience sitting around that person will feel you're looking at them. After you've made your point search the room for someone else wearing red. And talk to them sharing your next idea or message. And so on. (Any colour or gender will do!) Yes, it is mechanical, but it will *look* natural and as if you are genuinely keen to share your idea with those people.

There are some common eye contact problems people have when they are presenting. Typically these are:

- Concentrating on props such as notes, flipcharts, screens, PowerPoint etc. rather than paying attention to the audience, and their feelings about you and your presentation. Notes are especially distracting for an audience, particularly shaking ones in the hands of a nervous presenter. This 'shaking notes' syndrome is bad for audience concentration. At first they worry that the presenter might lose the plot, and if it continues, they can get irritated and stop listening. And it's bad for the presenter who has the evidence of their nervousness right there in front of them.
- Looking over people's heads. Because the audience are sitting down and you're standing, it's easy – and can feel more comfortable for you – to look at the wall, or out of the window behind them. But it is very distracting and unsettling for an audience, who can feel a superfluous to requirement because it looks like you're not very interested in them. *Where* you look when you lose eye contact up at the ceiling, straight ahead, down at the floor, etc. is an indication of the way you prefer to store and retrieve information. When you're aware of your preferences you can either work to subsume them during a presentation *or* pause to retrieve information.
- Looking down at the carpet or your feet. This is sometimes a sign of a negative internal dialogue with yourself, or too strong an emotional connection to your subject. Be careful that you don't get into this habit. It diverts your attention away from the audience to focus internally, and encourages negative inner feelings. Audiences tend

to find excessive emotion uncomfortable. There's also the danger they may think you've got something to hide because you won't make eye contact with them.

- Too little eye contact, leaving your audience feeling unvalued or uncertain if you're interested in or really talking to them. Remember 'enough' is as much as they want. This can mean very different things to different cultures, genders and sexualities. Make sure you offer enough contact to signal your interest in them and to access their reaction to your communication.
- Orphans – these are the people at the extreme edges of your audience who you probably aren't giving enough attention to. In a presentation, there is a temptation to focus on the middle group of people right in front of you, and to forget about those who are on the edge of your peripheral vision. Be particularly careful with this as senior people often sit at the edge of rooms or near a door so they can make an early exit. Don't encourage them to do this by ignoring them.
- Prisoners – the opposite of 'orphans', this refers to the habit of focussing your attention on just one or two people. Prisoners occur for two reasons. One is when they appear to give you so much positive feedback – smiling, nodding encouragement – that the rest of the group seem (or are) very negative. It's only natural to concentrate your attention on the person or people who appear to like you. The second is when they appear to hate everything about you and your presentation – looking away, glowering, or doodling. As presenters we take responsibility for this, when in fact the person is simply distracted by something that happened to them earlier. Avoid both forms of prisoner focus – you could lose the rest of your audience if you don't!

So if those are all the things to avoid, what's good eye contact? Our suggestions are that it's:

- **Balanced contact:** everyone gets some. And avoid focussing only on the high status people in the room– this can appear much too ingratiating and, at the very least, make everyone else cheesed off at you.

- **Random contact:** don't simply 'do the rounds' by sweeping your eye contact like the beam of a lighthouse from left to right or right to left. This feels very 'token' to the audience, and they may start to look away from you.
- **No orphans or prisoners:** again, make sure you include everyone in your eye contact. It's essential that you don't focus on a few who either give you very positive or very negative feedback. You mustn't let them feel like orphans nor take anyone 'prisoner.'
- **Respond to their eye contact with you:** notice when people want to give *you* more or less attention. Notice when they look away to reflect or to decide what they feel about what you've said. Seeing how people are responding is a key purpose of eye contact

It's also important to be aware that both culture and gender can affect eye contact. Women tend to blink more than men, so make sure you match this. Different cultures blink at different rates. Again, you need to adjust to this. What may seem like shyness or lack of confidence to you, could simply be the cultural norm for someone else.

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