

TEAM PLAYER

 *How to improve personnel management and your career*

EMBODY YOUR LEADERSHIP MESSAGE

Transmitting a message is not always just about words. To communicate truly effectively, your body must learn to speak the right language as well.

by Sara Boas

Every organisation has its own culture, its leadership style and a set of core messages. These messages are transmitted through documents, speeches, conversations, images, design and other aspects of the communication strategy. Some of these messages are formal and deliberate, such as a statement of the organisation's mission or vision. Others may be unintended, such as "We must..." and "We have to..." amongst a leadership that would like to be seen as flexible and creative, yet uses coercive language which implies that we are slaves to circumstance.



In this short article, I wish to draw attention to another way in which the organisation's leadership message is communicated: through its embodiment in the leadership. All human interaction is grounded in the living, breathing bodies of individuals. All of us – consciously or unconsciously – 'read' one another's body language and make meaning from what we see and feel. We can tell when someone is not comfortable with what they are saying, or when a motivational speech lacks genuine passion and conviction. When we 'read' the body, we use skills that are the birthright of every human being; innate skills that are much older and more deeply rooted than verbal language. Most of the meaning communicated in face to face interactions is based on non-verbal dimensions: the body posture, movement, gestures, timing, voice, eye contact and so on. The message that the organisation's leaders embody will either support or undermine the communication's purpose. This, in turn, has a direct impact on the sustainability of the organisation.

VARYING SCENARIOS Let us take the example of an organisational restructure: the Director of Communications gathers his functional team to discuss how the department will be re-shaped. Together, they discuss current socio-economic trends, the effects on their industry, the new demands this places on the organisation as a whole, and what this means for the communication department. The head of communications invites the team to share their views on how these changes will translate into new roles and responsibilities. As a communication expert, the team leader has prepared carefully, with attractive graphics and

a presentation that includes the appropriate 'buzz words': engagement, participation, involvement, emotional intelligence, vision sharing, joint action planning...

Now let's imagine two different scenarios, as if we were able to observe the team's interactions. We can see into the meeting room; the director – in this case a man – is facilitating the session. In the first scenario, the seating is around a U-shaped table. The leader moves to one side, at the head of the table, while each team member presents; his back is thus turned to the rest of the team. He seems to be listening attentively, but if we look closely, we may notice that his legs are crossed under the table and one foot is tapping in the air. His fingers are fiddling with his pen, papers and the edge of the table. He is leaning back into the chair so that his chest is slightly compressed; his breathing is steady and shallow. If we zoom in, we can see that although he is looking towards the team member, his gaze seems fixed on a point further away. When each team member finishes presenting, he thanks them loudly as soon as they have finished speaking. Although none of the team

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members has been trained to read body language, they all receive the same unconscious and unspoken message: “I am more interested in my own thoughts than in what you are saying; let's get through this exercise so that I can tell you how things are going to be in the future”.

In the second scenario, the chairs are arranged in a circle and the leader sits among the team during the individual presentations. As each team member shares their ideas, the team leader leans forward, his gaze is soft and yet constant – focused on the person speaking. His feet are flat on the ground; his back supported by his chair and yet almost upright. From time to time he writes down some key words, otherwise his hands are still. If we look closely, we may notice that his breathing changes slightly with excitement, tension, understanding or surprise as the ideas unfold. At the end of each presentation, he is quiet for a few seconds before thanking his colleague and continuing to facilitate the dialogue. His body language conveys a non-verbal message of... yes: engagement, participation, involvement,



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emotional intelligence, vision sharing, joint action planning... The message he embodies is congruent with the intended message of the session.

DIFFERENT LEVELS In this example, we can see how a leadership message works at three levels: individual, team and organisational. The team leader embodies his own values and attitudes in his body language. Without meaning to, he gives us information about how he leads his own working life. The team interactions also convey a leadership message – the proximity or distance of team members from one another, the level and quality of eye contact, the positioning or posturing that are part of the play of power and relationship. These tell us how he leads his team, and how team members collectively lead themselves. Thirdly, the organisation embodies its wider messages. These messages are incorporated – which literally means ‘to unite into one body’ – in the physical characteristics of the corporation. This means, firstly, the way leadership messages are embodied in the office environment, such as the layout of meeting rooms, or in the architecture of offices and other premises. Secondly, it includes the infrastructure of knowledge management systems, record keeping and intranets, especially in terms of data access to information, hierarchical structures and data transparency. And third-

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ly, organisational embodiment includes the typical body movements, postures and gestures of the people who work there. Every interaction is a conversation, from the moment someone focuses their attention on another person, to the time when they are out of sight or offline. Before and after speaking or writing, we sense each other – and make sense of what we see, hear and feel. In the scope of the whole interaction, only a small part of the communication takes place through verbal language. Let us consider how this might look in practice, in your own organisation.

INTERPRETATION Next time you attend a key meeting, take the time to observe your colleagues’ body posture, movements and gestures. You will notice that some people seem literally to dive headfirst into meetings, conversations and tasks. They move forward with abrupt, action-oriented

gestures that seem to say “Let’s get on with the action!” Others may appear to hold themselves back, even retreating a step or two when faced with a new challenge. Their body seems to say “Let’s not act until we have more information”. These are only two of the countless ways in which movement styles may reflect the way an individual leads her or his life. In terms of team leadership, you will see interactions that unconsciously embody the values and power play of the team. In many cultural settings in Europe, you can observe subtle dominance behaviours. You may also notice bodily signs of submission. These include putting a hand over or near the mouth when speaking, hunching the shoulders, or breaking eye contact. How do such dominance and submission behaviours fit with a leadership message that emphasises a ‘flat’ organisation, employee involvement in decision making, or egalitarian teamwork?

At the level of organisational embodiment, you can also make direct observations. The people around you will have different body types, in terms of height and weight, yet you will see the organisational culture expressed in a shared body language. Naturally, this collective movement culture is mostly unconscious, embedded in the ‘unwritten rules’ of the organisation. However, each organisation favours certain movement styles and even has an unconsciously agreed, appropriate speed at which people move around. If someone moves much faster or slower than this speed, they will be perceived by their colleagues as ‘rushing’ or ‘dragging’. The message this conveys depends on the cultural context. Moving quickly can give the message “She’s so motivated and efficient” or “She doesn’t even bother to stop and talk with her team”. Moving slowly may be interpreted as “He’s

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Embodiment in the leadership

- Everyone reads – consciously or unconsciously – body language and makes meaning of what he receives

Three levels

- Leadership messages work on individual, team and organisational levels

Organisational cultures

- Every organisation has its own unconscious norms of embodiment

Risks and Solutions

- When the leadership message is not embodied in a congruent way, leaders are perceived as inauthentic
- Authenticity is stimulated by a healthy level of self-questioning, which helps to nurture a credible leadership culture

such a calm and approachable leader” or “He’s so lazy and sluggish”.

NO ‘RIGHT’ WAY Organisational cultures vary as widely as national, religious, gender, and other identities. It is important to be aware that every organisation has its own unconscious norms of embodiment, through which leadership messages are transmitted and interpreted. Whether you mean to or not, these messages are communicated to all your organisation’s internal and external stakeholders. However, there is no fixed meaning to your embodiment; no ‘right way’ to use body language. Platitudes advising leaders to develop a ‘firm handshake’ or ‘open body posture’ are irrelevant, given the diversity of organisational and national culture. Embodying your leadership message is about the congruence between the different media of communication. These media include the leader’s body language and the non-verbal interactions within teams, as well as the way in which a

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leadership message is – or is not – incorporated into the organisation’s culture and infrastructure. So, embodying the leadership message is a matter of congruence, or authenticity. We can think of authenticity as the relationship between a person’s ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds, in which the inner is not subjugated to the outer. An authentic leader is true to herself or himself, in a way that is meaningful within the social context. When the leadership message is not embodied in a congruent way, leaders are perceived as inauthentic – even dishonest, manipulative, or inconsequential. In most cases, this is not deliberate deceit on the part of the leader, but a lack of honesty with self. Authenticity is stimulated by the challenge to be congruent; by a healthy level of self-questioning. To conclude, here are some questions to support you in embodying your leadership message:

1. *What are the key words and images in your vision, mission and values?*
2. *How can you imagine these key words and images being embodied, e.g. as movements, gestures, or body postures?*
3. *How often do you experience your own embodiment this way? How often do you see these movements, gestures and postures in everyday working life in your organisation?*
4. *What would bring even more alignment to your different communication channels? What are you saying that you cannot fully embody, because it does not ring true? What quiet voices, within yourself, your team or your organisation, have you been ignoring?*
5. *How would listening to these voices enable me to be more grounded, present, alive and authentic in embodying your leadership messages?*

Sara Boas

Founding director of the international consultancy Boas, committed to transforming leadership in business



Sara Boas is the founding director of Boas, an international consultancy committed to transforming leadership in business, the public sector, research institutions, NGOs and the arts. Clients include Cisco Systems, BMW, Heineken, BP, Ernst & Young, GlaxoSmithKline, American Express, IBM, and the Walt Disney Company. Sara is a member of the associate faculty at the London Business School, the Center for Creative Leadership, the Université Libre de Bruxelles and the University of London. She has designed and delivered over 25 new curricula in adult learning.

Asking these questions often, firstly to yourself and then to others around you, will help you and your organisation to nurture a vital, credible and authentic leadership culture. ■

