

# Learn to speak body language

It could mean the difference between getting that longed-for job and losing out again, says **Amy Anderson**

**W**hen we go for an interview, most of us think carefully about what to wear and what to say. We rarely think about how to act — in other words, what our body language is telling the interviewer. So how can we appear cool when every nerve is on edge?

Judy James, a body language specialist and the author of the book *Body Talk* (Industrial Society, £9.95), says that most interviewees who ask for advice are told "just be yourself". This, she says, is the wrong approach.

"If you are just going to be yourself, why not turn up in a sloppy tracksuit? You would never do that, so why 'just be yourself' in body language? Instead, by marketing your body language, you can become your own spin-doctor."

According to experts, body language accounts for 55 per cent of the perceived impact of communication. Tone of voice accounts for 33 per cent and words for just 7 per cent — so what you say matters much less than how you behave.

Employers nowadays are

sceptical about the glib interviewee who has memorised key words and phrases but who may be embellishing, concealing a basic lack of knowledge or simply lying. So they look increasingly for other signs to reveal a would-be employee's character and potential — such as body language.

In order to impress at an interview, you should prepare by performing a "dress rehearsal" in front of the mirror of your facial expressions and hand movements when answering questions. It sounds ridiculous but it works.

According to Ms James, there are several crucial points about body language to be aware of. In general, men have an advantage when it comes to revealing nervousness through body language. They tend to sit still, whereas women often flap their hands or cross their legs and swing the top leg, or clutch at their handbags. These actions should be minimised.

When it comes to facial signals, you should always smile when you enter the interview room and when you leave, since first and last impressions count. Try to smile from the eyes first — if models can learn to do this, Ms James says, so can we, and there is nothing worse than a painted-on smile coupled with terrified eyes.

You should try to make eye contact with the interviewer, but not for too long. Avoiding eye contact can be interpreted as a giveaway that you are lying. If you are addressing a panel of interviewers, look first at the person who asks you a question and then at each of the oth-



A demonstration of good body language at an interview in the 1952 film *Bachelor Mother*

er panel members in turn. Looking just at the questioner is a common mistake.

Keeping control of facial expressions is the most difficult art to master — hence the practice in front of a mirror. Try to nod occasionally while the questions are being asked, but avoid doing a "nodding dog" impression. Keep your chin up and try to look either at the desk or at the interviewer. Never look at the point just above the interviewer's head — it will make him or her nervous.

Another piece of advice is to develop a firm handshake — limp handshakes never im-

press. But wait to have your hand shaken by the interviewer, rather than making the first move. If you are carrying a bag when you enter the room, it is very important to keep it in your left hand, to make the handshake easier (it is simply unfortunate if the interviewer happens to be left-handed).

Once you are sitting down, your hands should generally stay loosely in your lap. Use them to gesticulate occasionally but never raise them above shoulder level, and do not fiddle with hair or jewellery. If you know that you tend to do this, remove the jewellery in ques-

tion and tie your hair back to avoid temptation.

Self-grooming is another classic sign of nerves — for example, picking at your nails or smoothing your hair down. It is to be avoided.

**A**s for your feet, keep them steady. Men are especially prone to the babyish habit of putting one foot on top of the other, tapping their feet or twirling them around chair legs. Women almost always cross their legs, which helps, but may be tempted to swing the top leg or to rotate the ankle. Men

should keep their legs parted but not splayed and women should cross their legs and keep them still — crossing at the ankles is too matronly.

Your posture should be straight-backed but not rigid. Always sit as far back in your chair as it will allow, because perching on the edge makes you look nervous and uncomfortable. Never slouch or sprawl and do not lean your elbows on the desk.

To get too close to your interviewer is a big mistake, as invading someone's personal space makes him or her feel threatened. If the interviewer is behind a desk, you will generally be OK.

Tell-tale signs that the interview has gone well are increased eye contact, the repetition of your name, closer body space and even some body contact, such as touching your arm when you leave. A look of relief may also be a giveaway — the process of choosing a candidate is stressful for interviewers.

If you have not been impressive, the interviewer will be trying *not* to behave in a familiar fashion. Tell-tale signs are a lack of eye contact, facial tension and a parting handshake that is firmer than the one with which you were greeted.

Body language is a subject that we all know something about, yet we underestimate the impact that our own body language has on others. In fact it is vital — and once someone has assessed it, even subconsciously, they are unlikely to change their conclusions. So at an interview, take the trouble to get it right first time.