



A MANAGER'S REFERENCE GUIDE TO NONVERBAL FEEDBACK

DID YOU KNOW THAT WHEN WE COMMUNICATE FACE TO FACE, ONLY 7% OF ANY MESSAGE IS CONVEYED THROUGH WORDS?



38% of our communication is through vocal modulations and tone—things like sarcasm or firmness. But 55%—more than half—of the messages we send are through nonverbal elements such as facial expressions, gestures and body posture.

At iCoachFirst, we emphasize the importance of all balancing all types of feedback—including both written and face-to-face feedback—but that when we take spoken words only at face value, we may only be walking away with a 7% understanding of what was really being said.

BODY LANGUAGE AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION MATTER



Most of us have developed a sophisticated unconscious understanding of nonverbal feedback. However, those gauges may sometimes be miscalibrated, or unconscious biases may be misleading us.

Body language can subvert and distort communication. It can also enhance and reinforce what we say. As managers, we can use nonverbal cues strategically, to spot problems or to give feedback more effectively.

**Every Manager Or Coach Should Have A Basic Understanding Of Nonverbal
Communications Before Going Into A Feedback Situation.**



EVERY EMPLOYEE IS DIFFERENT



No Two Employees Are Alike,

and this guide is not intended to be prescriptive. The non-verbal cues we discuss here are commonalities that scientists and psychologists have discovered over the past fifty years.

But They Do Not Apply To Everyone, Every Time.

Body language can vary by culture and even subculture. Much of the research we reference has been done on people in the North America and in particular in the U.S. so keep that in mind.

Some nonverbal cues, like facial expressions, are universal, but other gestures and even verbal tonal cues can differ wildly among people from other cultures. If you have employees from other countries, make the effort to explore what the norms are there and adapt your playbook.

Likewise, more and more often as managers, we have employees who place themselves somewhere on the autism spectrum or who otherwise feel challenged to express or interpret nonverbal cues in a traditional way. This can be sensitive and you shouldn't be trying to diagnose your employees, but do try not to make assumptions.

You should always treat body language as smoke, not fire. If you spot it and it looks worrisome, investigate further.

**The Best Way To Do This Is
To Simply Ask.**

Psychologist Brene Brown, in her book *Rising Strong*, talks about the importance of “**Rumbling With Our Stories.**”

When we lack information, says Brown, our brains are wired to fill in the gaps. They reward us with dopamine when we recognize and complete patterns, so even just thinking we know what someone else is thinking (even if we’re wrong) gives us a hit of pleasure chemicals.

**IN OTHER WORDS,
OUR BRAINS
ENCOURAGE US TO
JUMP TO
CONCLUSIONS.**

That means it’s important to share and verify our assumptions before we act on them. Sometimes someone is hugging themselves not because they are defensive or hostile to your feedback, but simply because they are cold.

With those disclaimers out of the way, let’s move on to some of the ways employees may be expressing themselves physically during feedback, and what it might mean.

FALSE POSITIVES - 5 Things to Consider



- 1 Be aware of nonverbal cues.
- 2 Be conscious of cultural differences.
- 3 Supplement visual cues by asking open questions.
- 4 Verify your impressions before jumping to conclusions.
- 5 Be conscious of individual communication styles or disorders

10 TYPES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:

Let's start by breaking down the different types of nonverbal communication.



1

BODY MOVEMENTS AND POSTURE

38% of our communication is through vocal modulations and tone—things like sarcasm or firmness. But 55%—more than half—of the messages we send are through nonverbal elements such as facial expressions, gestures and body posture.



2

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

The human face has 80 facial muscles that can create more than 7,000 facial expressions and communicates volumes without saying a word. Facial expressions, unlike many nonverbal cues, are innate and international. Expressions for happiness, anger, sadness, fear, surprise and disgust transcend culture.



3

HEAD MOTION

Typically, the use of our hands, gestures such as the making of a fist, waving, pointing, beckoning or gesticulating are conscious or unconscious accompaniment to our words. Gestures are highly cultural, and differ from region to region, so be cautious about interpreting them.



4

HAND GESTURES

Head motion is another type of nonverbal communication that differs from culture to culture. Many cultures swapping the meanings between nodding or shaking your head. In many Arabic and Mediterranean countries a single lift of the head upward is the sign for a “no”.



5

EYE CONTACT

Eye contact (or oculosics) is also culturally sensitive. In the U.S. maintaining near-constant eye contact is common, while other cultures see it as aggressive. Eye contact can communicate many things, such as engagement, interest, affection, hostility, fear, or excitement.



6

BREATHING

Breathing can be an important cue to emotional state that tends to transcend cultural barriers. Fast or heavy breathing is known to be a sign of high arousal. The source of that arousal could be joy and excitement—or it could be anger, nervousness, or fear. Slow or steady breathing is a sign of low arousal—which again could range from comfort to boredom.



7

TOUCH

How and when we choose to touch can communicate volumes. This is another culturally sensitive cue, and can also depend on personality. Things like a handshake, a hug, reaching a hand toward someone, patting them on the back, gripping their arm can all be very revealing.



8

SPACE

How we manage our personal space (proxemics) shows how threatened or comfortable we are. Some people stand or stretch out to be more dominant. Studies show that even fruit flies respond to dopamine levels by seeking to get closer or farther together.



9

TONE/VOICE

Speaking is more than words. It is also paralanguage, which includes things like tone, timing, volume, pacing, and inflection. We incorporate sounds that convey understanding, like “mmm” and “uh-huh,” or sounds that communicate disagreement, such as a word that is cut off before it can be uttered, or a questioning growl. Tone alone can indicate, hesitation, fear, anger, sarcasm, affection, confidence or excitement.



10

SILENCE

It's not just what you say, it's what you don't say. Use of silence can speak volumes. It may indicate listening or it may indicate hostility or recalcitrance. Pay close attention and think twice about filling the void. Sometimes an awkward silence is all an employee need to speak up with their real feelings.

THE SIX EFFECTS OF NONVERBAL CUES:

Now we know what to look for, but what is the impact? How can these cues and body language actually affect our interactions and messages? In the 1960s, psychologists Ekman and Friesen outlined the six key ways nonverbal cues will impact our messages—consciously or unconsciously—and they still hold true today:

NONVERBAL CUES CAN

CONTRADICT

Convey the opposite of the spoken message.
(Example: Saying yes, while crossing your arms tightly and compressing your lips.)

REPEAT

Emphasize the message in a conscious way.
(Example: Nodding while saying yes.)

SUBSTITUTE

Create a message in lieu of words.
(Example: Nodding to indicate agreement.)

COMPLEMENT

Reinforce the entire message while speaking.
(Example: Saying yes, and then nodding and giving a thumbs-up.)

ACCENT

Creates emphasis or amplifies part of the message. (Example: Saying 'yes, I think so' and then either nodding or shrugging to accent one over the other.)



REGULATE

Sends cues for someone to speak or stop speaking. (Example: Saying yes, and holding up a finger to indicate you will say more.)

EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

CUES

Your Employees Will Be Providing You With A Constant Stream Of Nonverbal Data While You Are Giving Them Feedback. Here Are A Few Key Things To Look For Especially In The Feedback Setting. (Check Out Our Glossary For More On What They Might Mean.)

 Encouraging Signs	 Warning Signs
Leaning forward	Leaning away or angled toward the door
Body facing you	No eye contact
Eyes open and making contact	Arms crossed tightly or self-hugging
Arms open and at sides or on table	Wringing hands
Head nodding	Pressed lips or clenched jaw
Smiling with all facial muscles	Fidgeting or tapping
Touching or reaching toward you	No expression or a smile that doesn't reach the eyes.
Taking notes	Silence
Modulated and calm vocal tone	Quick breath with no speech
Upright but not stiff posture	

YOUR NONVERBAL CUES

Body language can vary by culture and even subculture. Much of the research we reference has been done on people in the North America and in particular in the U.S. so keep that in mind.

10 Ways to Undermine Your Feedback:

1

FIDGETING AND PICKING AT SOMETHING:

You will seem nervous, bored or distracted.

2

CROSSING YOUR ARMS IN FRONT OF YOU:

You will come off aggressive or hostile.

3

TOUCHING YOUR FACE:

This implies you are feeling vulnerable or even that you are lying.

4

CHECKING THE TIME:

You're sending a message that you have better things to do.

5

AVOIDING EYE CONTACT:

You will come off as insincere, weak, or unresolved.

6

TOO MUCH EYE CONTACT:

This can also seem very aggressive.

7

FACING AWAY OR SITTING ON THE EDGE:

Sitting on the edge of your chair with feet pointed at the door, or facing away from your employee indicates stress and a desire to leave.

8

TAPPING STUFF:

Tapping your fingers, feet, or pens is distracting and makes you seem stressed.

9

SITTING OR STANDING TOO CLOSE:

Sitting closer than 3 feet in a small room or 4 feet in a large one will make people feel threatened.

10

FAKE SMILE:

If you can't give a real smile, don't bother trying. Humans can spot a fake smile very easily.

10 Ways to Enhance Your Feedback

1

RELAX YOUR POSTURE:

If you look comfortable in your surroundings your employees will feel less threatened.

2

ARMS:

Let your arms hang comfortably at your sides or put them on the table or your lap, so your employee can see you are open to what they are saying.

3

HANDS:

Emphasize what you are saying by using hand motions. It shows confidence, comfort and engagement. Reach a hand toward your employee when speaking to indicate a willingness to connect.

4

EYE CONTACT:

Practice the “triangle of eye contact”: looking from left eye to mouth to right eye, and also look away on occasion to give them a break.

5

NOD AND SMILE:

Nod when you agree and to encourage employees to talk. Where appropriate, give a real zygomatic smile with eye crinkles and facial muscles engaged.

6

PAY ATTENTION TO SPACE:

Sit close enough to connect, but far enough to not be threatening. Sit or stand with your legs slightly apart to show confidence.

7

LEAN IN:

Lean in toward employees slightly when talking or listening to show interest and engagement.

8

SILENCE:

If you ask a question, wait for the answer. Even when it is awkward. Eventually your employee will speak.

9

MIRROR:

Watch how your employee is positioned and try to mirror their movements (unless hostile) to increase their comfort level.

10

TAKENOTES:

Writing things down shows your employees you are paying attention and value their input. (Use a pen and paper, though, not a computer.) It also allows you to record the interaction in your coaching and feedback software like iCoachFirst, to ensure you can refer back to it later.

SIX THINGS TO DO AFTER GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

1

Lean In, But Angle Your Body Slightly Away From The Employee, To Show You Aren't A Threat And Are Open To Communicate.

2

Observe Them, But Don't Maintain A Relentless Eye Contact, As It Is A Sign Of Threat.

3

Ask For Their Feedback. Then Be Quiet And Let Them Speak. Wait. Even If It Takes A Long, Awkward Silence.

4

Give A Genuinely Sympathetic Smile And Tilt Your Head To Show Empathy And Passive Listening.

5

Give Them The Option To Process Your Feedback And To Respond In Writing Or With Another Meeting.

6

Document The Feedback In Your Coaching/feedback Software.



A VISUAL GLOSSARY OF NONVERBAL CUES

Common Body Postures And Nonverbal Cues And What They Might Mean.

Directly facing you with hands apart on the arms of the chair.



“I’m interested and engaged in this conversation.”

Crossed legs, or hands positioned over the groin area.



“I am feeling threatened.”

Turning their bodies away from you in their chair.



“I may be shy. Or I may want to get out of here.”

Arms very close against their sides and not moving much.



“I feel wary, defensive, and threatened.”

Holding up or hugging a barrier in front of them, such as a file, cup, or notebook.



“I am feeling threatened, afraid, or insecure.”

Touching or reaching a hand out to almost touch you.



“I am open to connecting with you.”

Fast and heavy breathing, maybe with dilated pupils.



“My emotions are aroused. I may be excited, upset or afraid.”

Touching neck or collar.

“I’m feeling vulnerable.”

Slow, modulated breathing.

“My emotions are calm. I may be in agreement or I may be bored or disengaged.”

Excessively touching their face or looking up and to the right.

“I may be lying.”

Excessive self-touching and self-hugging.

“I am stressed and trying to soothe myself.”

No eye contact.

“I am not open to connecting right now—I am afraid, angry, or emotional.”

Hand wringing.

“I am stressed, anxious, and tense.”

Hopping up and down.

“I need to get out of here. (I may need to visit the restroom.)”

Arms crossed against their body.

“I may be feeling defensive, in need of comfort or aggressive... or maybe it’s just cold in here.”

Leaning in toward you.

“I am actively listening to you.”

Subtly or broadly nodding their head.

“I agree. I may have more to add if you ask me.”

Taking a quick breath and holding it.

“I have something to say, but I’m reluctant or waiting to say it.”

Pressing lips together tightly, pursing lips or biting cheek.

“I am hostile and disagree, or I am holding back comments.”

Biting lip.

“I am nervous or I am thinking.”

Blushing or flushed cheeks and neck.

“I am embarrassed, or I might be lying.”

Checking the time.

“I am disengaged, I am short on time, or I feel you are wasting my time.”

Tilting head.

“I am listening or trying to understand.”

Picking at clothes, objects or fingernails.

“I am bored, I disagree, or I am disengaged.”

Sitting at the edge of a chair.

“I am excited and want to share an idea, or I am feeling on the edge and ready to run.”

Tapping with a pen or fingers.



“I am stressed, defensive, or impatient.”

Over-blinking.



“I am nervous, upset, or anxious.”

A genuine “zygomatic” smile with upturned corners of the mouth and wrinkled eyes.

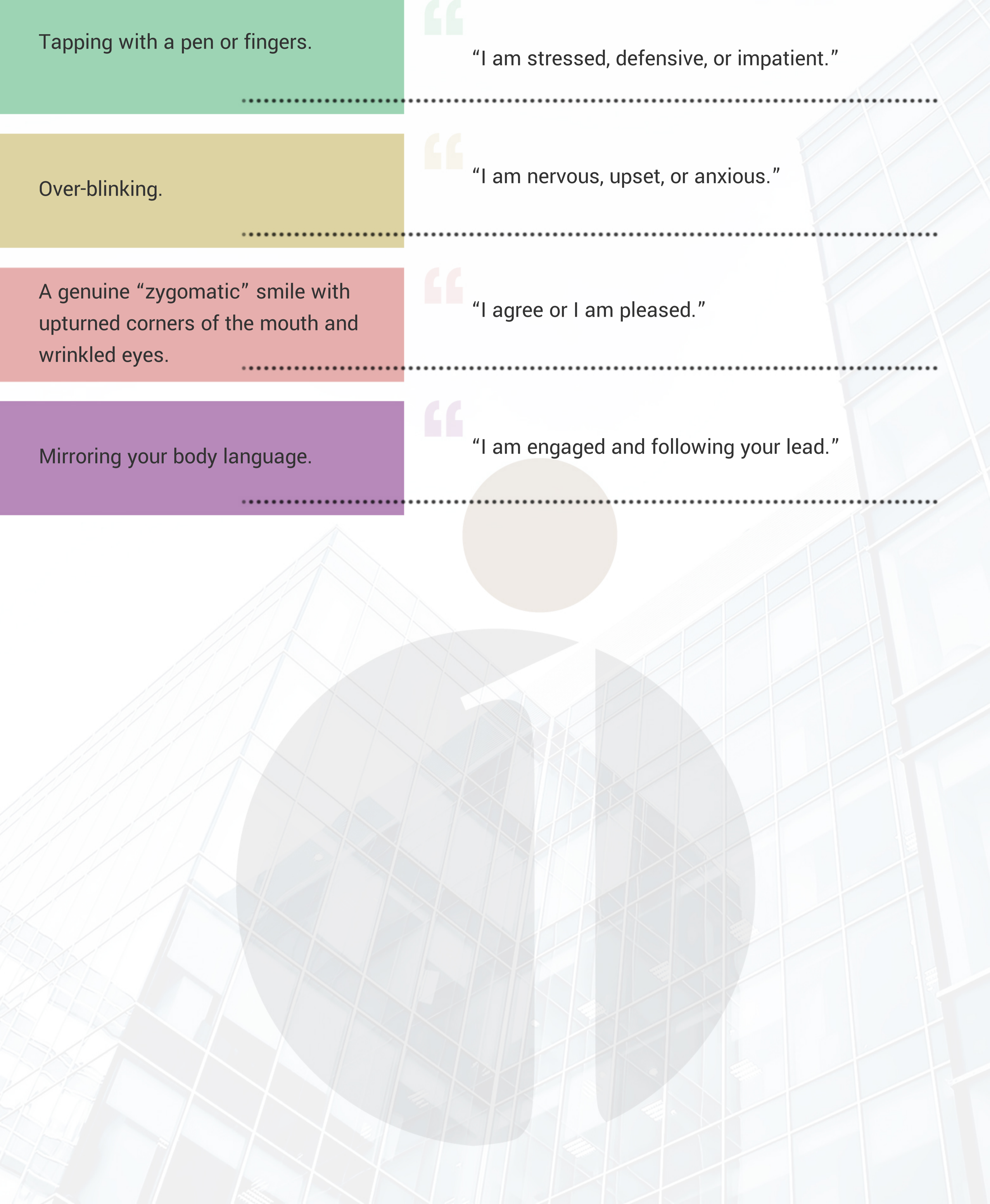
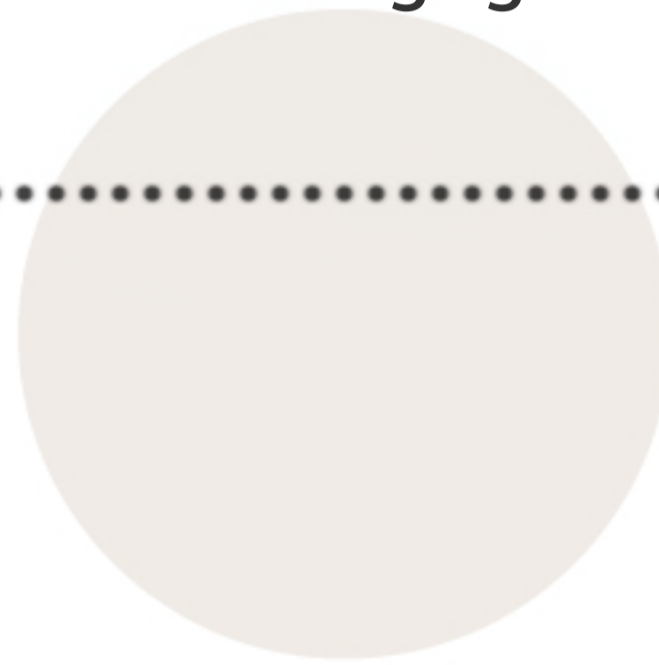


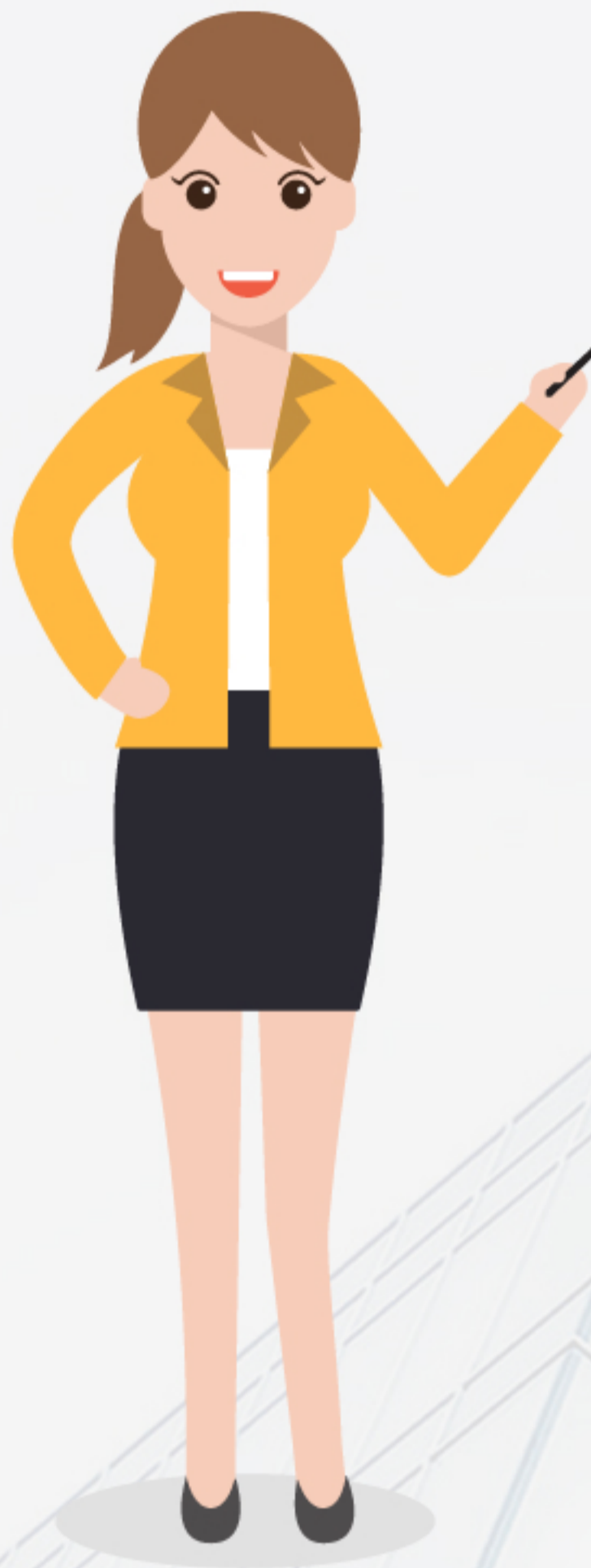
“I agree or I am pleased.”

Mirroring your body language.



“I am engaged and following your lead.”






Are You Using Your Full Range Of
Feedback Channels—from
Written Feedback To Nonverbal
Feedback— As Effectively As
Possible?

IT'S IMPORTANT TO MASTER THEM ALL!

Find Out More With
A Free Demo Of ICoach[®], Today!



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