

Sending Signals with Effective Body Language

From Tony Gisondi

Everyone has heard or used the term “body language.” We use it when we discuss umpiring and our presence on the field, or to describe how we act, or react, when handling situations that come up between umpires and coaches, or umpires and student-athletes. But what is body language? Body language is defined as non-verbal communication made up of body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. In everyday life, we send out and receive body language signals to those around us; we send and interpret signals, almost subconsciously. Body language gives clues to the attitude or frame of mind of a person; it may indicate aggression, boredom, or on a positive note; confidence and attentiveness.

In umpiring, one of the most basic and powerful body language signals is when an umpire crosses his or her arms across the chest when talking to a coach or to his crew. Crossed arms can be an indication a person is creating a barrier, often unconsciously, between themselves and others. In a confrontational situation, it might mean a person is expressing opposition or even worse; hostility. As umpires, we need to be conscious of our own body language. For example, avoid crossing our arms across our chest. This gesture may be perceived as an unwillingness to calmly negotiate a situation, or as one of obstruction.

Direct and engaged **eye contact** means a person is receiving what someone is saying with interest and attention. We can all agree that direct and focused eye contact is an excellent way in which an umpire can engage with another individual. Conversely, someone who is anxious or uncertain may be unable to establish eye contact without feeling unnatural or uncomfortable, none of which are communication traits umpires wish to have.

Experts tell us that boredom is indicated by tilting the head to one side, or by looking straight at someone, but with eyes slightly unfocused. Head tilting is a characteristic I notice when I evaluate umpires, and should be avoided. The ability to resolve a situation with confidence is reinforced by good posture, and extended and proper eye contact. We should always stand strong, remain non-confrontational and listen intently.

How can we modify our body language in a helpful way? First, to change your body language you must be aware of your body language. Become aware of how you stand, how you use your hands and legs, what you do while talking to someone. You might want to practice in front of a mirror, Watch any video that you have of yourself. If one is not available, ask someone to tape a game of yours. This will give you an excellent view on how you look to other people, giving you an opportunity to identify areas in which you can improve, and then practice to resolve. If none of these tools are available to you, learn the art of “visualization” - closing your eyes and imagine how you look to others. While your eyes are closed assess your stance and body language, and learn how to project a feeling of confidence. Observe umpires who have good body language, learning from what they do that is especially effective, and make it your own.

You can change your body language, but as with all new learning, it takes time for any changes you make to feel natural. Practice keeping your head still on pitches; finesse your timing; establish a good stance when working the plate. These things might take time to correct, especially if you have years doing any of them one way, and making too many changes at one time might become overwhelming. This is true for every umpire, no matter what your years of experience are or the success you have.

Body language makes a big difference to how we are perceived on the baseball field. Let your body language work for you. It communicates to administrators, coaches, student-athletes and fans you are a confident umpire.

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