

MODULE

03

Body Language

The first five seconds, the smile, and
the two boxes

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

People decide whether they like you before you have said a word. This module is about the part of your presentation that happens while you are still walking to the podium.

Body language comes in two forms. The **subconscious** kind runs by itself — a friend says their dog died and your hand goes to your chest without any decision being made. The **conscious** kind is everything you can choose: which emotions, which words, what pace. That conscious layer is what can be trained, and concentrating on it is what pushes nervousness off the table.

The discovery that reframed this module happened by accident. Steve's team had been filming students from the moment they reached the podium. A teaching assistant, not having been told otherwise, started the camera as speakers *entered the room*. Suddenly the feedback changed: "I liked the way she held herself. She walked in with confidence. She smiled at me."

We now know that in the **first five seconds** — usually before you have spoken — people form an opinion about whether they like you. By **ten seconds** it has solidified. If they decide against you, it is very hard to win them back no matter how good the speech is. If they decide for you, a mediocre presentation still carries.

Steve tested this with trained actors. One entered slouched, no eye contact, no smile, visibly nervous, then delivered a deliberately boring speech. Audiences said he was not confident, not very smart, and they did not like him — they inferred intelligence from the entrance. A second actor entered confident, smiling, making eye contact, and gave **exactly the same boring speech**, same flat delivery. Audiences loved her, called her smart and confident, and rated the speech itself as far better. Same speech.

The smile is the single most powerful form of human body language worldwide. People reflect back what they see. Walk in nervous and the room gets nervous for you, you notice it, and the spiral starts.

5 sec

to form an opinion of
you

10 sec

until that opinion
hardens

#1

smile: strongest human
body-language signal

4

quadrants to work with
your eyes

KEY CONCEPTS

The communication box

Top of your head to your belly button. This is where you want every eye in the room concentrated. Move around too much and your legs become part of the box — and your legs are not communicating anything.

The gesture box

Chin to belly button. Gestures live here. Never gesture in front of your face: 55% of people connect through gestures including facial ones, so covering your face throws away your strongest channel. Watch trained broadcasters — a startling number get this wrong.

The box four

Divide the audience into four quadrants and deliberately make eye contact with each. You are showing people you think enough of them to look right at them.

Obama in Denver

At his second convention nomination speech, held in an outdoor stadium at night, Obama could not see a single face — the lights were in his eyes. He worked the four quadrants anyway. Afterwards, one of the most common things researchers heard was "he looked right at me."

REMEMBER

- Your speech starts when you enter the room, not when you reach the podium.
- Smile for at least five seconds. Three is not enough to register.
- Audiences mirror you. Give them confidence and they hand it back.

- Everything belongs in the communication box. Nothing below the belly button.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Film your entrance

Not your speech — your entrance. Fifteen seconds, from the door to the spot where you would begin.

Watch it back with no sound. In the first five seconds, what would a stranger conclude about you?

How long does your smile actually last? Time it.

Did you make eye contact with the camera before you started speaking? Where were your eyes?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Filmed the entrance, not just the speech
- ☐ Timed my smile
- ☐ Re-shot it at least once with a longer smile

EXERCISE 2

Practise the box four

Divide any room into quadrants and work them deliberately until it stops feeling mechanical.

Do it in an empty room, out loud, three times. What felt unnatural?

Now do it with real people — a meeting, a dinner table, anywhere. What did you notice coming back at you?

EXERCISE 3

Find your box violations

Almost everyone gestures outside the gesture box without knowing it.

Watch your baseline recording once more, only tracking your hands. Where did they go outside chin-to-belly-button?

Did you ever cover your own face? When?

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: