Leadership Spotlight
Recognizing Nonverbal Indicators of Comfort and Stress

While attending a recent task force meeting, I became amazed at how insensitive the team leader briefing the assembled officers on an upcoming operation was to the nonverbal stress indicators displayed by the group. He charged ahead, clearly making his point and obviously promoting his own personal agenda. I observed that the requests he delivered to the assembled group far exceeded the relationship he had with the individuals in the room. As each minute passed, more and more people averted their glances; angled their bodies away; and, in some cases, simply folded their arms, tilted their heads down, and either compressed their eyebrows or closed their eyes entirely. Even though the atmosphere said no, the oblivious team leader said yes.

As we interact with the people in our lives, we constantly take in data on how they communicate with the world. We listen to how they say things, we watch their body language, and we observe how they communicate in writing. In every instance, we subconsciously record the normal pattern for communication from these individuals and any deviation from this gives us pause. We then ask, “What’s wrong?” Studies have shown that approximately 60 to 85 percent of all communication is nonverbal. The baseline of nonverbal behavior can easily be divided into two categories, comfort and stress. A strong leader can quickly recognize comfort from stress in those they intend to lead.

In the task force meeting, the team leader should have noticed how the assembled group started displaying stress by the way they were both blocking and compressing their body language. In general, if someone is exhibiting stress, their bodies will reflect it through either compression or blocking. By contrast, when people are comfortable, they will present an open-type of body language. The body will be angled toward the speaker; the eyebrows may elevate; the head may be tilted to the side; and, in general, a smile will ensue.

Regardless of the leadership role we assume in life (whether as a spouse, parent, law enforcement professional, or friend and colleague), it is imperative that we read and recognize the nonverbal body language of those with whom we interact. Our ability to lead is ultimately only as effective as our ability to recognize the effect our words and actions have on others.

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