

Power Gesture

*The greatest ruler acts as he speaks
and tailors his speech to his actions.*

—CONFUCIUS

In August 1964, Sir Winston Churchill lay dying in London's King Edward VII Hospital. General Eisenhower, who had just attended the twentieth anniversary of the D day invasion in France, visited his bedside. The venerable statesman, then in his ninetieth year, did not speak when Eisenhower entered his suite but instead reached out a frail pink hand to clasp Eisenhower's. The two hands joined on the bedside table.

No words were spoken—just two partners sharing silently the memories of their struggles in war and peace for the principles they both cherished. Ten minutes passed in silence. Two nations, two leaders, and two friends. Then Churchill unclasped his right hand and slowly moved it in a “vee for victory” sign!

Eisenhower, his eyes moist, left the room and told an aide:

I just said good-bye to Winston, but you never say farewell to courage.

Gestures Say More Than Words

Sometimes gestures say more than words. Other than Calvin Coolidge, the American president of fewest words was our first. George Washington was uncomfortable in speech. He grew up in the shadow of an older half-brother, Lawrence, whom he idolized. Lawrence had been educated at an English boarding school, and then commissioned in the Royal Navy. He possessed all the refinements of an English gentleman. George, back on the family farm with an almost illiterate mother, suffered by comparison.

George was six feet, three and a half inches tall by the time he was thirteen. He had the looks of a grown man, but his shyness and awkward speech belied his appearance. His solution was to talk as little as possible.

The Strong Silent Man

So Washington learned to make his actions speak for him. By doing so, he would become the prototype for the “strong silent man.” At the turn of the last century, Owen Wister would write *The Virginian*, a novel about a Wyoming cowboy from Virginia. It engaged the imagination of early film writers. Years later movie stars Gary Cooper, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood would all play heroes shaped by the Washington mold.

Washington demonstrated the power of his silence in 1781 when he was bidding his officers farewell at Fraunce's Tavern, near Wall Street in New York City, before he would board a boat that would take him back to Mount Vernon.

At the tavern, Washington did not shake hands. Instead, he stopped by each officer, engaged the man's eyes, and then nodded. Then he passed on to the next. Some officers recorded in their diaries that it was the most

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meaningful moment in their life. A gesture may be a signal from the soul that words cannot convey.

The next time these officers saw Washington was in 1786, when he delivered another body signal that might well have averted a revolt. In a farmyard thirty miles west of Philadelphia, former Continental Army officers gathered to demand their back pay. They were threatening to mount an assault against the government in Philadelphia.

Washington rode up from Mount Vernon to confront them. He alit from his white stallion in the barnyard. Standing before the group of officers, the old general drew out a prepared statement from his cloak. Then he took some spectacles from his pocket and began:

Gentlemen, I must apologize for my spectacles. My eyes have grown old in the service of my country.

The officers had never seen him wear glasses before. Some of them wept. After his short statement, the officers disbanded.

Twelve years later, in 1798, President Washington was striving to maintain neutrality in the war between Britain and France. Passions ran high in the new nation for coming to the aid of France, our former Revolutionary War ally. One evening a mob of three hundred, armed with clubs and guns, surged against the presidential mansion in Philadelphia. As they approached, Washington went to the front window and gazed out at the approaching rioters. His arms, folded across his chest, reinforced his cold stare.

When the ringleader came face-to-face with Washington, with only a windowpane between, he took one look at the resolute and contemptuous president and slinked away. The crowd of armed demonstrators followed him.

Again, a gesture succeeded when words might have failed.

A Master of Body Language

To liken the first United States president of this new century with our country's first-ever president would seem blasphemous to some—certainly in terms of character and integrity. Washington was a volunteer soldier whose public and private record reveals not one misrepresentation or lie.

Yet, like Washington, Bill Clinton is a master of body language. This is the secret of his communications magic. He has survived scandals that would have toppled others—Whitewater, the Monica Lewinsky mess, the close-to-a-million-dollar settlement with Paula Jones, the Juanita Broderick rape allegations, the rental of the Lincoln Bedroom, and, of course, the impeachment vote. And then the Arkansas disbarment proceedings on top of that.

Bill Clinton survived and prevailed because of his superb skills of projecting sincerity and commitment. He did this not with *what* he said but with *how* he said it.

Clinton has not coined any memorable lines such as Roosevelt or Kennedy did. Those presidents have dozens of sayings recorded in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Even the elder George Bush, whose forte was not eloquence, will be remembered for "a thousand points of light" and a "kinder and gentler nation" (phrases that came from the pen of Peggy Noonan).

Clinton, however, is the supreme artist in the creation and display of body signals. With body language, he bonded with the American people. His arsenal of physical cues include the biting of the lip to flash anguish, the looking up at the ceiling to suggest deep consideration of a question, the clenching of his jaw to manifest determination, and the pounding on the desk to signal angry

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resolve. He could run the gamut from a broad grin to tears in seconds—as he did when the camera caught him smiling as he walked away from the memorial church service honoring his secretary of commerce Ron Brown, who had been killed in an air crash.

The Genius of Gesture

Whether TV viewers observed Clinton presenting an award to Eagle Scouts at a Rose Garden ceremony or making a classroom appearance with Afro-American students at a Washington school, they saw him radiating compassion and oozing commitment through body and facial language. He would hug the teacher and pat a kid's shoulders. He would nod approval to a comment or throw his head back in a chuckle to a jocular comment. Then he would open his mouth in wonderment at a tale of achievement.

But put him in the Oval Office for his weekly radio chat, and his speech fell flat. He needed people around him with whom to connect, on whom he could use a Power Gesture.

Personal Confession

Bill Clinton was best when he was having a conversation with his audience and body language was part of that conversation. Remember when he talked to an audience of black ministers? He talked to them as if he were on Oprah Winfrey's show. In "personal confession," he is supreme, and his gestures and expressions reinforce his penitence.

Clinton is unmatched in one-on-one sessions. A former Republican governor who became acquainted with Clinton when both were governors told me that he came away from a meeting sold, "as if I had found an alter-ego whose attitudes, ideas, and views were just like my own."

Bonding Through Body Language

In small group meetings, Clinton was just about as persuasive. Again, it was not his words but the physical ways in which he

would establish communication with his listeners—the fixed-eye glance, the toss of a head, or a hand on the shoulder.

With such body language, Clinton projected a likeability and warmth, not only to the audience in the Rose Garden or Oval Office, but also to the TV audience watching clips of such sessions on the evening news. Body language was the power that propelled Clinton's approval ratings upward.

Clinton's most famous gesture was wielded to enforce his most noted and quoted statement. At that press conference in January 1998, he pointed his index finger as he said, "I have never had sex with that woman."

The wagging finger enforced the credibility of a statement that was a lie. It only proves how powerful one body signal can be.

But it is not necessary for an executive to try to develop his or her leadership potential by practicing all kinds of hand or face movements. In fact, if you are not a professional actor, trying them would be self-defeating. Concentrate on just one gesture for a meeting or talk.

The Right Signal at the Right Time

One gesture may be all it takes to get your point across. Some years ago the chairman and chief executive of a bakery company had just completed successful negotiations in buying another bakery in an adjoining state, a deal that would ensure bigger profits and growth for the future. The board members, who were aware of the proposed merger, looked at him when he walked into the conference room, but his face showed no expression. As he got to his chair, he gave a thumbs-up sign and his mouth stretched into a big grin.

The CEO's later explanation of financial details was almost anticlimactic. The thumbs-up epitomized his leadership style. The right signal can magnify a speaking moment.

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The quintessential memory of the great comedian Jack Benny is his deadpan turning aside when the robber asks him, "Your money or your life?"

Then, after some seconds, Benny says, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

Remember how Johnny Carson directed his eyes to the ceiling with that perplexed grin of his? This was his classic reaction to the diminutive and aged sexologist Dr. Ruth Westheimer when she explained the nature of an orgasm.

Sometimes the right gesture speaks more eloquently than words. Senator John McCain returned in April 2000 to the "Vietnam Hilton," where he was once held prisoner. It is now a museum that parades pictures of happy and smiling prisoners. McCain pointed out one photograph of a grinning prisoner scratching his chin with

only the middle finger of his hand. The prisoner's face may have been smiling at his Vietcong captors, but his gesture conveyed to Americans an altogether different attitude.

Ronald Reagan defeated President Carter with the perfect gesture in his 1980 debate. After Carter attacked him, Reagan delivered his patented cock of the head with a smile and uttered, "There you go again."

When the Pencil Is Mightier Than the Sword

President Eisenhower had a way of expressing displeasure without saying a word. For example, Secretary of Agriculture Benson was once fulminating on a matter of foreign policy in a cabinet meeting. Because this was outside the secretary's realm of expertise, the president began stabbing the tablet with his pencil and then he looked at the ceiling with a grimace. Benson stopped.

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In the Eisenhower era, an act that got a lot of attention was one by Eisenhower's Russian counterpart in the Cold War, Nikita Khrushchev. At the United Nations, when a litany of Soviet Union human rights violations was being detailed by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, the Soviet chairman took off his shoe and banged it on the table before him. British prime minister Harold MacMillan then dryly asked, "May we have a translation?"

And then there's the most notorious gesture in history: Pontius Pilate washing his hands after the Sanhedrin's guilty verdict on Christ.

Acts by the body can count more than words. Silent signals can register even louder than speech.

Executives as well as politicians can benefit by putting this knowledge to good use. For example, a pipe-smoking executive with a leading mineral company built his career as a union negotiator through body language. He would fold his hands tentlike to show interest in a proposal. Then he would stroke his chin to signal his consideration of it. If he was skeptical, he would cross his arms in front of his shoulders. The ultimate rejection was his pounding ashes out of his pipe. Though he was the ranking executive of the corporate team, he would let others do most of the talking. But his cues were signals for them to start translating his gestures into words.

Another executive I knew once opened a company meeting by pointing his finger like a pistol, aiming, and firing three times. He followed up by outlining three ways they were going to "kill" their chief competitor: "by lower costs" (he cocked his finger in trigger action), "by better marketing" (he cocked it again), "and by a new advertising campaign" (and he flashed his index finger as a pistol once again).

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Finding the Right Exhibit

Sometimes it is not so much exhibiting the right pose as finding the right exhibit. A woman executive wanted to dramatize the cost of government regulation to a business. At a trade association breakfast meeting, she carried to the front of the table piles of huge sheets of paper tied with rubber bands. Then she dropped them on the table in front of her with a thud. After a pause, she announced:

These are copies of all the regulations from the Federal Register. Some of them conflict with each other, but we have to comply with all of them. These are taxes, not only of our money, but of our time and personnel.

Ben's Briefcase of Bills

Benjamin Franklin, America's first self-made millionaire, was no orator. In fact, he often preferred symbols to words. He once advised a merchant to tear down this sign: "John Thompson Hatter Makes and Sells Hats for Ready Cash and Money." Franklin then told the merchant: "Thompson, put up a new one with just a picture of a hat."

Franklin was without peer as a negotiator, as this story demonstrates:

At the end of the Revolutionary War, he headed the diplomatic team that went to Paris to work out a treaty with the British.

The Americans wanted all the British territory to the Mississippi, fishing rights off New England and Canada, and non-harassment of our commercial ships on the high seas.

These were uphill negotiations because the British had the power to leave the situation in limbo. They had little to gain by formally recognizing the new American government. Yet Franklin succeeded in hammering out an agreement with the British. But when the time came for putting pen to treaty, Lord Shelburne balked and began to walk out of the Round Room at Lansdowne House in London.

"Just a minute," said Franklin. "First you better settle your bill." And Franklin dug into his traveling case and pulled out, one by one, hundreds of itemized records—of houses requisitioned, warehouses taken over, barns burned, wagons appropriated, and horses seized.

Shelburne looked at them, sighed, and then signed, saying, "You're a hard man, Franklin."

With one dramatic gesture, Franklin forced the British to sign the treaty recognizing the new thirteen freed colonies as a nation.

Leadership sometimes demands more than verbiage. It requires visible acts. Chose and use a Power Gesture.

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