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~ Dr Andrew S. Nevin (PhD)

West Africa Financial Services Leader and Chief Economist, PwC

Foreword by Mark Bowden

#1 expert on body language ~ Global Gurus

Influence

and

THRIVE



*How Professionals, Entrepreneurs, Business Leaders,
& Corporations
Use Effective Communication To Get Results*

Lucille Ossai

Influence and **THRIVE**



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& Corporations
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CONTENTS

Foreword	19
Preface	21
Introduction: Why Communication Skills Are Highly Demanded In <i>Corporateville</i>	25

PART I

WHY PERSUASIVE BODY LANGUAGE BOOSTS CREDIBILITY

1. Should You 'Fake It' Until You Become 'It'?	33
Strike a pose	33
Communicate purposely with your body language	35
2. 'Inauthentic' Body Language Behaviours Get Results. Here's Why	39
What does 'authentic' really mean?	39
Put on the body language of the person you want to become	41
3. The Power To Influence Rests In The Palms Of Your Hands	47
The power of the gesture	48
Natural gestures versus 'wooden' gestures	49
Why natural gestures connect	49
4. The S-C-A-N System For Interpreting Audiences' Non-Verbal Cues In High-Stakes Contexts	53
The S-C-A-N system	54
5. How To Boost Your Non-Verbal Communication	59
Step 1: Move confidently to inspire confidence	59
Step 2: Become mindful of negative facial expressions	60
Step 3: Pause more	61
Step 4: Look at your audience and engage	61
Step 5: Adopt 'open' body language cues	62

6. Get Noticed With Your Tone	63
Using your tone to your advantage	63

PART II
POWERFUL PUBLIC SPEAKING TO WIN HEARTS

7. Just Get To The Point	69
Starting with a punch	71
Ending strong	74
8. The Three Rules Of Effective Communication: The A-B-F Formula	77
Rule #1: Audience – Consider your audience’s needs	78
Rule #2: Beacons – Use simplicity, brevity, and clarity	78
Rule #3: Feedback – Ensure it’s timely and factual	79
9. Storytelling – The Key To Powerful Speeches And Engaging Presentations	83
The neuroscience of storytelling	84
The S-T-A-R Principle	85
Sticky messages drive results	85
10. Be Kind To Your Audience. “Active Listening Is Draining”	89
When short content is best	89
The 18-minute ‘rule’ for speeches and presentations	90
11. Why Business Owners And Entrepreneurs Must Hone Public Speaking Skills	93
Why honing your speaking skills will win you more clients and boosts results	94
Despite the critics, keep honing your speaking skills	96
12. Introverts: You Can Become Compelling Speakers	99
Overcoming criticisms and self-sabotage	100
Speaking persuasively in your own skin	102

13. Nailing Impromptu Speaking	107
Five tips to excel in impromptu speaking	108
The P-R-E-P Method	108
14. To Use Or Not To Use 'Fillers'	111
Why excessive filler words don't do you any favours	111
The importance of context when using fillers	112
Practice – the 'secret' to memorable public speaking	113
15. How To Use Powerpoint (Or Other Presentation Applications) Effectively	117
How to get the maximum impact from your presentations	118
Use the speaking style that works for you	120

PART III
COMPELLING BUSINESS WRITING TO TRIGGER RESULTS

16. Six Reasons For Poor Business Writing Skills, And Solutions	125
The two simple habits that will amplify your writing skills	127
How to write convincingly at work	129
Context matters when writing about sensitive issues	130
17. The Three Rules Of Effective Business Writing	133
Rule #1: Consider the recipient	133
Rule #2: Espouse the three beacons of effective business communication: simplicity, brevity, and clarity	136
Rule #3: Edit and proofread thoroughly	150
18. Refining The Craft Of Business Writing	157
Practical suggestions for writing business documents	158
19. Writing Persuasive Reports	163
Why an executive summary amplifies your report	163
Producing convincing reports	166

20. Crafting Powerful Emails	173
Highlight the value	174
21. Penning Compelling Formal Letters	183
Tips for writing formal letters	184
Examples of formal letters	186
Getting the structure right	191

PART IV
HOW PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESS PEOPLE EXCEL
WITH PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION

22. Amplify Your Communication Skills With Rhetoric	195
Six rhetorical principles to power your delivery	196
23. Interviews With Professionals, Entrepreneurs, And Leaders On Effective Communication Skills	199
Why you need to ‘sharpen your communication axe’	231
24. C-Suite Executives: Heighten Your Influence With Convincing Communication Skills	235
#1. Cultivate a growth mindset	236
#2. Develop cultural awareness	237
#3. Foster interpersonal skills	238
25. The Three Communication Truths You Must Embrace To Excel	241
Truth #1: Becoming a convincing speaker is achievable	242
Truth #2: Speaking purposefully wins over more people	244
Truth #3: Writing concisely leads to quicker results	244
26. Relevance And Complexity In Communication: What You Need To Know	247
#1. Your content must be relevant to spur action	248
#2. Your content must be relevant to win over people	248

Leaders beware: Complex communication kills influence	249
#1. Complexity stalls progress	250
#2. Complexity diminishes collaboration	251
#3. Complexity limits actions	251

PART V
HOW CORPORATIONS AND ORGANISATIONS THRIVE
BY USING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

27. Why A Culture Of Communication In The Workplace Is Essential For Effectiveness	257
The rise of content that converts	258
The importance of trust in the workplace	258
How to foster a culture of communication	262
28. Promoting A Healthy Corporate Image With The Flexible Communications Strategy (FCS)	267
The impact of the flexible communications strategy inside the organisation	268
The impact of the flexible communications strategy outside the organisation	271
29. Boosting Your Corporate Reputation With Strategic Communications	281
Use internal communications to build trust for workplace results	282
Use external communications to increase exposure	283
30. Positioning Your Business Content For Brand Dominance	289
#1. Choosing the right content: the 'What' component	290
#2. Spreading/promoting the right content: the 'How' component	292
31. Emotive Storytelling: The Brand's Superpower	297
How brands can use emotive storytelling to boost revenue	298
32. Managing Your Teams With Effective Communication	301
Creating a listening culture	302

Conclusion	315
Epilogue	319
References	321
About Lucille Ossai	331
Acknowledgements	335

CHAPTER 4

THE S-C-A-N SYSTEM FOR INTERPRETING AUDIENCES' NON-VERBAL CUES IN HIGH-STAKES CONTEXTS

It would be nice, incredibly useful, and profitable for you if you possessed a superpower that enabled you to read minds (to gauge intent) or successfully interpret body language behaviours. People spend their whole lives studying human behaviours to lend their expertise to detecting deception or predicting outcomes based on non-verbal cues displayed. Law enforcement agencies use interrogation techniques and polygraphs to get a sense of whether deception is present so they know where to prioritise their investigations. (I'm an avid fan of detective programmes. I'm often intrigued by how cases are solved using technology, good old police work, and the knowledge of human behaviour.)

Nevertheless, despite advances in technology and improved knowledge of human behaviours, experts in deception detection will tell you that it's almost impossible to conclude with 100% accuracy that someone is lying.

And in the business context, it's difficult to ascertain what some body language behaviours mean, especially in contexts where stakes are high – think of congressional hearings, media briefings following scandals, or interviews with political leaders.

That's why Mark Bowden's S-C-A-N formula is useful. It provides a step-by-step guide to help you navigate the complexities of non-verbal behaviours.

The S-C-A-N system

In his session on *The Business Leadership Podcast for Business Leaders*¹, Mark Bowden recommends that we use the S-C-A-N system to interpret an audience's non-verbal cues so that we make more accurate plans to get desired results.

S – Suspend judgement

C – Consider context

A – Ask specific questions

N – Note new judgement

To illustrate how to use this system, imagine yourself the lead character in the scenario below, which, although fictitious, is a practical scenario you could be faced with.

Relatable Account

You're a business leader of the most valuable Fortune 500 company for the year. You're fairly new on the job, with an uneventful six-month tenure to your credit. Yet, due to a sudden stock market crash, which occurred recently, you're required to articulate a decision that will result in a job loss of 40%, a loss of millions of dollars in revenue, and reduced dividends for shareholders. To save the company from looming bankruptcy, you must communicate your decision, as well as recommend drastic actions that must be speedily implemented.

You're scheduled to deliver your speech at a press conference. Due to the elite status of your company, your press conference will be aired by local, national, and international media. You know the stakes couldn't be higher, so you've prepared and rehearsed your delivery for weeks. You're familiar with your financials and have carefully outlined a route which – if you receive the desired support from the public, regulatory authorities and the Board – will ultimately save the company from a likely demise.

You mount the podium, and lights flash as the media frenzy begins with pictures being taken and multiple voices spewing out questions. Your company's press executive intervenes by stepping forward; she quiets the irate crowd and pleads for them to refrain from asking questions until your 20-minute address is delivered. The din is finally reduced to a hush. With trembling hands, you open the bottle of water, thoughtfully provided, and pour some of the lukewarm contents into a glass. You take a few gulps, clear your suddenly parched throat and look at the audience. A sea of 50 unsmiling faces glares at you, frowns clearly etched on some, while many have folded arms across chests. Others appear indifferent to you, almost as though nothing you could say could persuade them that you have a solution to the worst crisis corporateville has experienced in the year.

Before you open your mouth, you sense that you're already considered the villain.

However, Bowden's S-C-A-N formula would help you navigate the confusing signals you're receiving and bring you closer to the truth.

How to use the S-C-A-N system

First, *suspend* judgement. Do some critical thinking about the situation before you arrive at any conclusions. Instead of assuming you're hated and are only the bearer of bad news, realise that the audience doesn't have enough data about you to make a judgement about your character. It might be that a few, in the absence of more information, will resort to negatives (as human beings tend to do, a habit that's traced back to an evolutionary need to protect oneself from the unknown – hence the fight-or-flight response). However, it's possible that other people displaying defensive or aggressive non-verbal cues (frowning, folding arms over chests, glaring, etc.) might be simply concerned about the situation. They might even be worried about issues that are unrelated to you. In other words, don't be presumptuous.

Next, consider the *context*. The press conference is critical to educating the public about the corporate crisis and providing a solution to salvage your company. The event is thus a tense scenario, which cannot be treated with

levity. The non-verbal cues displayed understandably match the seriousness of the issue. Again, angry non-verbal signals may or may not be directed at you.

Third, *ask* specific questions. Or in the scenario described, reframe questions you receive so you can answer them clearly. Don't hide behind jargon or 'empty' statements that don't offer credible or empathetic feelings. So say, "We are sorry", instead of, "We apologise", and do your best to be transparent.

When asking questions in other situations, aim to unravel what certain non-verbal cues might be. For example, if you make a point and notice someone scowl, you could ask the subject specifically: "I noticed that you looked concerned about the X point I made. Do you think it's useful in that context, or is there anything you'd like clarification on?" Use questions to find out whether the 'subject' (your audience) agrees with your line of reasoning. Asking targeted questions will save you the grief from wrongly allocating resources to a particular project when those involved don't support your decision, or pursuing an initiative that people believe is doomed to fail. Again, don't assume you know best what people are thinking and what they're feeling, without asking them open-ended questions. A caveat – be prepared to receive honest feedback, which might challenge your plans and compel you to change your line of action.

Finally, note the *new* judgement. With new insights received from the first three tests, you can formulate a new judgement.

As Bowden explains, your new judgement might be similar to your initial judgement, such as the audience disliking you and what you stand for in the fictitious scenario described previously. If that's the case, as the business leader, you'll need to address the situation.

For example, after the Q&A, you could state:

Relatable Account (continued from page 55)

Thank you for your questions. I've sought to answer them as clearly as possible. For more clarification, please refer to the updated media page on our website.

Now, I realise that my decision will be considered harsh and insensitive in the short-term. The distress of losing your jobs

and consequently being unable to provide for your families or dependants in this uncertain economy is a legitimate worry. And I'm sorry for causing you such concern. Regretfully, we cannot prevent the widespread job losses that will be effected across our regions, and not only in this country. Nevertheless, we'll ensure that all your allowances and entitlements are paid within two days of your official notifications. I've directed our global human resources director to communicate the details of our generous severance packages this week.

In the long run, our decision to streamline our operations and focus on our strength – manufacturing – will ensure that this company, a global icon, will not only stay afloat but will thrive. We plan to excel by boosting our engineering prowess using our patented technological tools, and benefitting from our technical staff – the best engineering, robotics, and AI brains on the planet. We'll work to ensure that after the critical period of adjustment, about 24 months, we'll emerge more robust.

We're committed to restoring your faith in us, and we aim to become that national pride that would employ your children, your children's children and subsequent generations for years to come.

Thank you for your time.

Alternatively, concerning the fictitious scenario and what your audience was thinking, the new judgement you form with the S-C-A-N system might be an awareness of what the non-verbal cues you saw signified – concern and not disgust. This realisation might require you to take a different course of action to get the desired results.

Use the S-C-A-N system any time you need to give speeches and addresses in public, and especially when speaking at special events where there's likely to be opposition to your views or actions. Since it's humanly impossible to be 100% accurate about what people are thinking and feeling, arm yourself with as much data as possible to make it easier to determine what your audience is *likely* to be thinking. In this way, you'll be able to tailor your other

communication actions – public speaking and business writing – to suit the needs of the audience.

It's only then that you'll become an effective communicator.

In the next chapter, I explore non-verbal behaviours further and list other steps you can take to improve your non-verbal communication.

Key takeaways

1. Deciphering with 100% accuracy what the body language of others means is virtually impossible, so be realistic in your expectations.
2. Getting closer to unravelling what your audience is thinking when they display non-verbal cues in *high-stakes* situations is possible. With Bowden's S-C-A-N system, you're more likely to interpret body language behaviours. Armed with the insights you glean, you can tailor your communications to coax the desired actions from your audience.

***Effective communication will never go out of style.
It will outlive the critics, survive shifting trends,
and thrive in this tech age.***

As a professional, entrepreneur, or business leader, you must amplify your communication skills to accelerate your career, grow your business, or sharpen your credibility.

As a corporation, you must use purposeful communication to nurture trust, coax employee engagement, boost your reputation, and steer actions to profitability.

But how can you get the results you deserve with effective communication and position yourself for long-term success?

In this book, you'll find the latest insights on non-verbal communication, public speaking, and business writing to build your knowledge of best practices. Then you'll learn practical techniques for honing these communication skills to influence people and thrive in your arena.

Lucille Ossai draws upon recommendations from thought leaders and practitioners in the field: from researchers and authors to communication experts. Written in the author's signature simple, yet authoritative style, the book is enhanced by her experience as a communications trainer, advisor, and blogger. From her anecdotes and interviews with successful professionals, entrepreneurs, and business leaders, you'll discover what to do, what you must avoid in your communication – and how to proceed.

This evergreen resource will become your invaluable companion as you strive for excellence in your industry.



Lucille Ossai is a communications trainer, advisor, speaker, and multi-award-winning blogger. She's also the founder of Rethinking Business Communications Limited, a communication outfit that delivers training and advisory services in non-verbal communication, public speaking, and business writing. Lucille lives in Lagos, Nigeria with her husband, Val, and three children: Jason, Zara, and Leon.

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