

# Addressing the nation, leaders say one thing. Does their body language say another?

March 16 2020, by Molly Callahan

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When leaders address their constituents, what they say matters as much as how they say it—perhaps even more so when citizens are looking for

answers to often life-or-death questions about the COVID-19 pandemic.

To those watching his recent addresses, President Donald J. Trump's words and his body [language](#) have sometimes broadcast conflicting information, said Laura Dudley, a behavioral analyst at Northeastern University.

"Viewers who tuned in looking for reassurance from the president may have received it from Trump's words, if not from his body language," said Dudley, an associate clinical professor at the university who specializes in body language.

During his address Wednesday to outline his administration's response to the pandemic, Trump made statements including: "The virus will not have a chance against us," and, "We have the best economy, the most advanced health care, and the most talented doctors, scientists, and researchers anywhere in the world," Dudley noted.

While he was saying that, however, "Trump appeared to sit stiffly behind his desk, with his shoulders slightly hunched and hands folded in front of him, eyes squinting as he stared at the camera teleprompter," she said.

Dudley cautioned that body language isn't an exact science, because it's impossible to divine a person's private thoughts with 100 percent certainty. But in general, [body](#) language experts suggest that certain behaviors convey confidence, while others send the opposite message, Dudley said.

"For example, good posture is generally associated with confidence," she said. "Smiling is typically encouraged, though of course it would not be appropriate in this situation. Eye contact is also encouraged, though perhaps difficult to achieve when facing a camera and reading off of a teleprompter."

Meanwhile, behaviors such as fidgeting, crossing one's arms, and blinking rapidly, may suggest that a person is nervous, defensive, or distressed, she said.

Dudley said that [body language](#) experts also recommend being aware of one's [hand](#) gestures while speaking.

"In particular, open hands and arms can suggest that a person has nothing to hide. Not only do these [hand gestures](#) potentially convey messages such as "I'm trustworthy," or "I'm in control," she said, "but also because they may help our ability to deliver clear thoughts and arguments."

Tibetan Buddhist monks, for example, are known to gesticulate wildly with open hands while they debate, she said.

For [leaders](#) such as Trump—and, frankly, for everyone—being aware of both the verbal and nonverbal languages they're using is important to becoming effective and "mindful" communicators, Dudley said.

"Empathy and compassion are key aspects of a mindful conversation," she said. "When we have the interest of the other person in mind rather than just our own interest, we are better communicators and may find that we are able to come together even when we have opposing viewpoints.

"To be fair," she added, "this is difficult to achieve when speaking in front of a camera rather than a conversational partner."

Provided by Northeastern University

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