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Working

See how others see you

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If you could hold a mirror up to yourself, would you be surprised that you came across as curt during meetings?

Or maybe you'd be stunned to see yourself smiling and nodding your head way too often in that overpleasing sort of way when your boss asks you to do something?

Often we don't really know how we come across to others.

We may think we're being efficient or helpful. But to the folks on the receiving end, there's a chance that our efficiency looks awfully close to jerkiness and our cheerfulness spells doormat.

It's something worth paying attention to because those mixed messages — when the words and body language don't match — are the biggest reason for communication breakdowns at work, said Donna Fisher, author of *Power Networking* and a communications coach for companies and individuals in Houston.

It's really important to be aware of how others respond to you, she said. If you're not getting the reaction you want, it's time to change your approach.

For some, it's just doing a better job of combining words and actions.

To find out how we appear in the eyes of others, some folks are using cameras, hiring coaches and asking friends for observations.

Jessica Surber got an important insight when a coach followed her around for several hours as she went to meetings, met with clients and refilled her coffee cup.

Surber was surprised to learn from this observer that co-workers watched her for hidden clues because it's her job to bring in business for the human resources consulting firm Capital H Group in The Woodlands.

When co-workers saw Surber tired or frustrated, they wondered whether it was because she was worried about a contract falling through, even though her mood may have had nothing to do with work.

The coach recommended that Surber leave little room for interpretation when she's trying to make a point. And that might very well include an explanation of how her infant daughter kept her up at night after a widely observed yawn.

'Shadowing' service

That "shadowing" is one of the services offered by coaching companies hired by companies like the Capital H Group. This service runs from \$5,000 and \$50,000 a year depending on the coach.

While these coaches used to focus on the problems of bad managers, today companies provide coaches to their stars to fine-tune their performance, Surber said.

It's not always necessary to hire someone to point out your personality quirks. One time my sister Amy was visiting and she came along to an interview with me. Afterward she said my questions were good, but she surprised me by pointing out a distracting habit: I put my hands in front of my mouth too much when I was talking.

After that, I was very conscious to keep my hands down. And I don't think I've done it again.

Houston lawyer and mediator Shirley Redwine turned to video analysis at work after using it to improve her golf swing.

Redwine, who describes herself as the "city's worst golfer," didn't improve when her golf coach told her to keep her head steady when she took a swing. But she stopped that bad habit once she saw her swing on tape.

"They can tell you 1,000 times not to bob your head. But when you see the video," it's immediately obvious, she said.

Redwine experienced a similar revelation about her presentations at work. She was convinced the tape would show that her expressive sweeping arm gestures — which she had been asked to do by a public speaking coach — coupled with a "personality plus" presentation style, would be way over the top.

But to her surprise, it wasn't.

A downside

All these stories about the virtues of videotaping sound great to me, but I can also see a downside.

I've always wondered how I come across to others, and I have the answer in several drawers at home. They're videotapes of me on television, but I've never watched them.

There's a big part of me that doesn't want to know how I looked. And like a lot of people, I cringe when I hear recordings of my voice.

But perhaps it's just a question of what I want to improve.

A video to improve my swimming stroke doesn't sound nearly so bad.

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