

ASSERTIVE BODY LANGUAGE

Introduction

Imagine you're telling two friends a story. As you begin to speak, Amy leans slightly closer, then sits completely still, leaning towards you, eyes locked on yours, mouth slightly open. Meanwhile, Brian sinks into the sofa, stares up at the ceiling, then looks down at his fingernails. It's clear who's interested, and who isn't.

Now imagine you're watching two prison officers on a wing. Emma is only five foot three, but as she moves around the landing getting prisoners back to their cells before lunch, she walks with confidence. Reaching a group of three prisoners who are still chatting, she stops, stands still, places her hands on her hips and speaks clearly, calmly and authoritatively. The three prisoners bump fists and head straight to their cells. Meanwhile Freddie is trying to do the same along the other landing. He approaches two prisoners hesitantly, his shoulders slumped slightly. As he speaks to them, he shifts his weight from one leg to the other. His choice of words – "Come on, time to get back to your cells" – matches Emma's. But his body language and tone seem uncertain. The prisoners keep talking and only head back to their cells when Emma completes her side of the landing and reminds them.

As a prison officer, the words we choose are important. But words have their limits. The wing may be noisy. Prisoners may not hear or understand everything we say. They may be thinking about something else entirely. Body language helps us communicate both what we want prisoners to do, and our positive and constructive intent.

Assertive body language means positioning our body and hands to project both confidence and authority, and a relaxed and open manner. We demonstrate the confidence needed to maintain order in prison and balance this with the warmth and openness needed to build trust and relationships. This allows us to achieve our immediate goals, in maintaining a safe and orderly prison, and to work towards more ambitious goals of rehabilitation.

How can you pursue this strategy?

Pursuing this strategy means being intentional about body language. Working out whether our feet, knees, shoulders, hands and head are all in the right place may seem like a lot to deal with initially. Take it step by step, practise, and it will start to feel natural.

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- A. **Feet:** Firstly, keep your feet hip-width apart, one foot slightly in front of the other. Keeping your feet at this width slightly broadens your frame, helping the rest of your body to straighten and square up. This position is also a stable one – it gives you lots of support. Try to keep your feet in one position for a while. If you are frequently shuffling them around or changing your balance, you look less in control.
- B. **Shoulders:** You want to project – and feel – calm and relaxed. If your shoulders are tensed up, breathe out, and let them fall slightly.
- C. **Hands:** You need to keep your hands free, open and relaxed. Try to avoid crossing your arms, which looks nervous and makes it harder to respond rapidly to changes in the situation. Similarly, keep your hands out of your pockets so you can use them quickly if needed.
- D. **Facial expression:** You want to maintain a calm and relaxed facial expression. You are trying to project both authority and calm. You are in control of the situation, and your body language shows this. But that doesn't mean you are tense. Your expression is neutral, ready to discuss, to observe, or to act, as required: neither excited nor hostile. You also want to look open to, and face towards, the speaker. This allows you to address them, and to respond to facial expression and gestures. Consider also those around you – you may want to move to a position where you can see other prisoners more easily.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Smile selectively.** In most situations, smiling is welcome: we smile to express warmth, good humour and friendliness. But in a socially tense situation smiling can be misinterpreted. A prisoner may see a smile as superior: that the smiler is looking down on them in some way. Or a smile may come across as nervous and placatory. This isn't to say don't smile. In moments of humour or warmth, smiling is completely appropriate. But we recommend keeping a smile out of your neutral, everyday assertive stance. Save it for when it's merited.

Case Study 1

It is the end of association, and it is time to lock all prisoners up in their cells. Officer Doherty rocks uncertainly from one foot to another. He moves his hands hesitantly, holding one hand in the other, shifting them into another position and finally folding his arms. Officer Doherty then approaches a couple of prisoners and tentatively says "Alright lads, time to go back to your cells

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now.” The prisoners look at the officer blankly and don’t comply with officer Doherty’s instructions.

This is a **non-example** because the officer is demonstrating that they are not confident in giving instructions through their body language. By rocking from one foot to another and shifting from position to position he is demonstrating a lack of assertiveness to prisoners around him. This means that prisoners are far less likely to comply with his instructions when they are approached.

An example of good practice would be if the officer was more conscious and deliberate about their body language and stance when they are around prisoners. They would stand still with their feet hip width apart with one in front of the other. Their knees and shoulder would be relaxed, and their hands would be open, free and relaxed. They would face prisoners when they speak to them and have a calm and relaxed facial expression. They could say the exact same phrase (“Alright lads, time to go back to your cells now”) but using the strong voice technique.

Case Study 2

Officer Duru is new to the prison officer role and wants to make an impression with the prisoners that she is working with that they shouldn’t mess with her. During lock up she shouts “It’s bang up now. Everyone back to their cells right away”. She approaches a prisoner who is still out on the landing. She says to the prisoner “Don’t take the piss lad, get back to your cell now” while clenching her fists. The prisoner rolls their eyes and the officer smiles at them and says: “Come on then off to your cell”.

Why is this a non-example? Consider what the officer should have done differently?

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn’t choose to use this technique:

- In what situations, in your day-to-day practice, might it be appropriate not to adopt an assertive stance?
- Is there anything about the assertive stance that you may adapt for your context or because it feels more authentic to you?
- Would you ever adapt your assertive stance based on the prisoner that you are speaking to?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?