



Executive Coaching and the Uncanny Valley in Leadership

What they don't teach you in business school about body language and leadership



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Have you heard about the "uncanny valley"? It has emerged as a new meme in robotics and animation. It refers to the situation in which the facial expression of the avatar is really good, but not quite so good as to look real so that viewers ultimately view it as weird, fake or even revolting. Just drop the term casually into your next conversation with a tech guy if you want to look like you are a native of the Valley.

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I once had a boss who was like that. Every time he smiled you knew that underneath it all, he actually wanted to kill you. It wasn't just the facial expression. His body language gave him away so the overall effect was weird and fake.

Uncanny Valley Leaders

Of course many or most leaders aren't like that. On the other hand many are, although maybe the uncanny valley effect isn't so pronounced. But it's quite likely that many leaders suffer from this effect, especially when they are new. And it's probable that many of them fail because of this or something similar, even though in many other ways they are good leaders. That's because their colleagues, followers and partners see something out of whack, weird or strange, or just not quite right.

So if we want to add a new expression to leadership we can talk of uncanny valley leaders, ones who either look fake or just don't look right. The reason is that there is a mismatch between the signals they are sending with the various parts of their body, including their face, postures, voice and actions and the effect they want to create. If we want to look even more sage, we can classify uncanny valley leadership as being the opposite of authentic leadership.

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When you are a leader, your postures and facial expressions are especially important because they send signals to others. But it's not just about signaling either. We now know through experiments in neuroscience and psychology that our body – through its postures and actions – actually impacts our thinking and plays a key part in it. That idea is called embodied cognition, it's all the rage these days, and justifiably so. So it's not just your brain that does the heavy lifting; your body does too, in thinking that is.

First-Time Leaders

For everyone who becomes a leader, there's a first time. For a small minority this will be an easy transition. They will naturally transition to leadership. They will intuitively know and understand the signals they are sending out and will tailor those to the environment they are in and the impact they want to create.

But for most new leaders, that isn't the case. They will not be aware of the signals they are sending out since this is all happening unconsciously. They won't understand if those signals are inappropriate, unconstructive or even dysfunctional.

Most leaders won't have the uncanny valley effect since they have already managed some people, although that won't always be the case. But the majority will be in-between, having some rudimentary idea of the signals they are sending out, but only that. It might be too late once they find out what is really going on.

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And when you get to be a leader for the first time, you might be in a new organization or environment which you don't understand. You may not have any friends or colleagues who can help advise and sometimes rescue you. That's how

Management Education Needs to Add Body Language and Signaling

In fact, we now know that there is another effect going on in our body and limbs which also effects how we think, namely proprioception. This is our awareness of how the various parts of our body relate to each other physically and in space. This actually is an integral part of our thinking and cognitive processes as well as part of our unconscious signaling. It is also a huge contributor to our leadership impact.

If we are really good at this we may be a great athlete or actor. Proprioception is part of everyone's thinking process even though they are mostly not aware of it. Those who are very aware of it may have high kinesthetic intelligence, such as sportspeople. The awareness of proprioception helps you communicate better with others. In other words, it helps you become a better leader. So better be aware of this next time you move your elbow.

So in becoming a leader, it's not just how you use your facial expressions or your voice, it's how you use your body. Your body language, its postures, the characteristics of your movement, how you sit and how you stand are all key signaling mechanisms if you are a leader, not to mention in any human situation.

Moreover it's now clear that you can use proprioception proactively to help you change your behaviors. So knowing how your postures impact your thinking enables you to actually change your thinking and behaviors. So now we are going beyond mere awareness of the impact of your body language to using your body postures to change and improve the way you think and behave as a leader.

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We are used to seeing and working with people who have studied management and leadership. Yet the issues of facial and body signaling, postures and movement are rarely taught as part of this body of knowledge. Yet these issues are arguably even more important than some of the other topics that are taught in business school such as organization, culture and process.

Proprioceptive priming is used especially by great actors and politicians. Ronald Reagan comes to mind but of course there are numerous others. Many of the greatest leaders are (usually unconsciously) using proprioceptive priming and leveraging embodied cognition in their leadership approach.

In other words, leadership isn't just about saying and doing the right things, although of course it includes these. It is also about postures, facial expressions, how they link together, proprioceptive priming and ways of using our bodies and limbs to impact our thinking. Good leaders unconsciously leverage embodied cognition, although if asked about it, they probably wouldn't know what you are talking about.

Coaching and Acting

In my coaching I quite often advise my clients to do some acting training. Sometimes they can be offended or resent the implication that they should use their body in a way that is seen as being deceptive by those they lead and manage.

But my advice is based on the notion that often new - - and not-so-new – leaders don't realize much or anything about this dimension of leadership. If they find out they can significantly or even radically improve the effectiveness of their leadership and communications with their people.

We use this effect in our coaching programs in my company. We call it proprioceptive priming. It's a way of using postures and body movement to prime your thinking to improve your leadership and to send out the right signals to your followers. So that you don't inadvertently fall into the trap of the uncanny valley. And even more so that you can improve your leadership impact and tune the signals you are sending out to the impacts you want to achieve.

“...It's a way of using postures and body movement to prime your thinking to improve your leadership...”

Of course acting training is only one of many ways to improve the leadership impact of executives. Just being aware of these signaling processes is a good start. Having a coach read back to you the impacts, both intended and unintended, of your signaling can be a transformative experience. You don't have to go to

acting school to figure out how to improve your impact. But you do need to understand the potential of your body signaling processes to improve your leadership and to achieve different types of leadership impacts and results.

In our increasingly cerebral world, we tend to forget the importance of our bodies, as thinking tools. To become better leaders we have got to go way beyond conscious thinking, and even exercising (although that's important too). The tools afforded us by embodied cognition and which are used by all the greatest leaders are a key part of the great leader's toolkit too.

Recommendations

1. **Read a book on body language**
2. **Get assessed on your leadership characteristics and have the coach link your results to desirable body signaling mechanisms for your particular leadership type**
3. **Ask your significant other to rate you on your body language and its effectiveness**

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