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Leadership Beyond Words: A Mixed Study of Body Language in Organizations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research explores the impact of body language within the business environment, with a specific focus on how a leader's non-verbal communication influences employee trust, engagement, and overall perceptions of leadership effectiveness. While leadership is often associated with technical expertise, decision-making, and strategic thinking, this study investigates whether the way leaders physically present themselves to their teams may be just as influential in shaping how employees respond to them.

The main objective of this project was to answer the research question: *What is the impact of body language in the business environment? More specifically, how does a leader's body language influence employee trust and engagement?* To explore this, the research first evaluated existing academic literature on non-verbal communication, leadership perception, employee behavior, and workplace effectiveness. Specifically, body language cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, vocal delivery, physical proximity, and consistency between verbal and non-verbal communication were examined in the literature.

To back up the literature review, a mixed descriptive research methodology was used. An original survey was designed based on the main themes identified in previous research and distributed through university and professional networks. A total of 44 participants completed the survey, representing three professional groups: business students, early-career business professionals, and managers/executives/professors. The survey included demographic questions, 15 Likert-scale statements, A/B choice questions, and open-ended responses in order to capture both measurable trends and personal perceptions of leadership body language.

The findings consistently showed that body language plays a major role in how leadership is perceived in business settings. Participants strongly agreed that inconsistencies between a leader's words and body language reduce trust, and that behaviors such as smiling, nodding, eye contact, and open posture positively influence perceptions of charisma, supportiveness, and credibility. The results suggest that effective leadership in modern business environments is not based solely on technical knowledge or authority, but also on a leader's ability to communicate confidence, authenticity, empathy, and engagement through non-verbal behavior.

Keywords: Leadership, non-verbal Communication, Body Language, Employee Trust, Leadership Effectiveness, Business Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Walk into almost any workplace, whether it is a boardroom, a team meeting, or even a one-on-one performance review, and it quickly becomes clear that leadership is communicated through much more than words alone. Before a leader even begins speaking, employees are already observing how they carry themselves, whether they make eye contact, how confidently they stand, and even the tone in which they welcome others. These small behaviors may seem insignificant on their own, but together they begin to shape how that leader is perceived. In business environments where trust, collaboration, and performance are essential, these first impressions and continued non-verbal interactions can have lasting effects on employee relationships and overall team effectiveness (Trichas & Schyns, 2012).

Leadership has traditionally been associated with decision-making ability, strategic thinking, and technical expertise (Katz, 1995). While these qualities are clearly important, they do not fully explain why some leaders are able to inspire trust, loyalty, and engagement while others struggle to connect with their teams despite having strong business knowledge. Research suggests that followers' evaluations of leaders are influenced not only by what leaders know or the decisions they make, but also by how they are perceived during interpersonal interactions (Vazquez, 2014). Much of this could possibly be due to how leaders communicate non-verbally. Body language, which includes facial expressions, posture, gestures, eye contact, vocal delivery, physical distance, and other non-verbal cues, plays an important role in how confidence, competence, empathy, and authenticity are communicated (Vazquez, 2014). In many cases, employees begin forming opinions about a leader long before any strategic discussion takes place (Robertson, 2020).

As workplaces become increasingly collaborative, diverse, and relationship-driven, understanding the role of non-verbal communication in leadership becomes more relevant than ever. Employees today are not simply looking for managers who can assign tasks or produce results. They are also looking for leaders they can trust, communicate openly with, and feel motivated by (Robertson, 2020). Because of this, the way leaders physically present themselves may have a direct impact on employee engagement, willingness to share ideas, emotional safety, and overall team performance.

This research addresses two main gaps in the existing literature. The first is a conceptual gap. Leadership is typically viewed as being based on analytical abilities, decision-making, and technical skills. However, as discussed throughout this study, a leader's body language can also play a significant role in shaping trust, communication, and team effectiveness. While previous research has examined certain aspects of body language in leadership, these studies tend to focus on specific behaviors in isolation. This creates a fragmented understanding of the topic. As leaders communicate through a combination of non-verbal cues rather than just one or two behaviors, a more holistic view is needed to better understand the overall impact of body language on leadership effectiveness. That includes correlating certain behaviors with certain perceptions that create that embodiment of leadership. The second gap is methodological. Some of the existing literature is theoretical, focusing on proposing concepts and frameworks rather than testing them empirically. By incorporating empirical research, this exploratory study helps bridge theory and practice, bringing together different aspects of body language into a single concept and providing evidence of how some of these behaviors influence different perceptions of leadership.

To address this gap, this research explores the question: *What is the impact of body language in the business environment?* More specifically, this study aims to understand: *How does a leader's body language influence employee trust and engagement?* In order to answer this, the research combines a review of the existing academic literature on non-verbal communication and leadership with empirical work based on the process of primary data collected through a survey of business students, early-career professionals, and experienced business leaders. This study aims to contribute to academic conversations on effective leadership by understanding whether body language is simply a supportive leadership skill, or whether it is one of the key factors that determines how effective a leader is within the modern business environment (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016).

This paper is organized into five main sections. The Literature Review examines existing academic research on non-verbal communication. The Methods section outlines the mixed research design used, detailing the survey instrument, sampling strategy, and the three participant groups targeted. The Results section presents the survey findings in full, beginning with participant demographics, followed by a question-by-question analysis of the fifteen Likert-scale

items, a comparison of responses across professional groups, and the outcomes of the A/B choice and open-ended questions. The Discussion interprets these findings in relation to the academic literature, identifying where the data supports, nuances, or extends existing theory. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the key insights of the study, affirming the central role of body language in leadership effectiveness and reflecting on the implications for business practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Communication in the Business Environment

According to Stojanović (2021), effective communication is crucial for an organization to function effectively. The way information flows internally can either dismantle organizational problems or completely amplify them. This dynamic is particularly critical between employers and employees (Stojanović et al., 2021). When leadership communicates poorly, or stays silent altogether, subordinates do not simply miss that information but rather, they lose faith in their leaders. Silence is frequently interpreted by the workforce as a warning that management could be hiding something, even if they are not or that the business is heading in the wrong direction. Consequently, mastering clear interaction is becoming a mandatory ability across every tier of a company leadership (Stojanović et al., 2021).

Continuously, Stojanović (2021), explains that for those at the top, this responsibility demands a massive portion of their professional lives. Executive leaders routinely spend more than 85% of their workdays simply communicating with others, a reality that caused the American Association of Managers to declare communication as the single greatest challenge facing modern leadership. When organizations fail to prioritize this skill, the consequences are immediate and destructive. Mismanaged communication has a unique way of fabricating friction out of thin air and escalating minor misunderstandings into exhaustive workplace conflicts. In fact, teams with poor communication often find themselves locked in bitter arguments over goals they agree on, mistakenly focusing on their differences simply because they lack the clarity to see their alignment (Stojanović et al., 2021).

According to Kacharava and Kemertelidze (2016), communication is a process of transmitting information, ideas, thoughts, and emotions to establish contact and develop relationships between people. While both verbal and non-verbal communication serve the same fundamental purpose, transferring and receiving information, they rely on entirely different sensory pathways and cognitive processes. Verbal communication depends on the organs of hearing, requiring the brain to receive and decode uttered words, phrases, and sentences to ensure they are properly understood. In contrast, non-verbal communication is primarily accomplished through the organs of vision, where the brain processes viewed objects, images, gestures, mimics, and eye signals. Consequently, while verbal interactions focus on linguistic comprehension, non-verbal communication requires the observer to properly perceive visual elements and mind the inherent symbolism behind every physical cue.

Definition of Body Language and What it Encompasses

Non-verbal communication, commonly referred to as body language can be defined as "the sending and receiving of thoughts and feelings via non-verbal behavior" (Bonaccio et al, 2016), encompassing a wide range of sensory signals or "cues." These cues operate alongside verbal communication in multiple ways: they may repeat spoken messages, such as nodding; substitute them such as with eye rolling; complement them in ways like blushing; accent them with an action like a congratulatory pat, or even contradict them such as displaying tears while claiming emotional stability (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Experts organize these behaviors into a typology of codes ranging from micro movements like eye gaze to macro movements such as a hug to display warmth (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Central among these is kinesics which refers to communication through body movement, including gestures, posture, facial expressions, body orientation, nodding, hand shaking, and eye contact (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016; Bonaccio et al., 2016). More broadly, non-verbal communication incorporates facial expression, body language, and vocal intonation, all of which provide additional nuance and depth to verbal messages (Azhar, 2024). It also includes both visual and auditory elements, such as gestures, gaze, posture, and vocal characteristics like pitch, tone, and pacing (Schyns & Mohr, 2004), highlighting that while non-verbal communication is non-linguistic, it still possesses vocal dimensions that shape how messages are conveyed rather than what is explicitly said (Bonaccio et al., 2016).

Beyond kinesics, several other dimensions further illustrate the complexity of non-verbal communication. Oculistics focuses on eye behavior, including gaze, blinking, and pupil dilation, much of which occurs involuntarily (Bonaccio et al., 2016), while haptics examines the touch of another person, where variations in intensity, type, and location display different meanings and can be highly impacted by cultural norms. These could include a pat, a slap, or a stroke which would all signify an alternative meaning (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Proxemics refers to the use of personal space, with acceptable distances varying across cultures, for example, professional interactions in North America typically occur between four and eight feet and friendly interactions between 1.5 and 4 feet (Bonaccio et al., 2016).

Despite non-verbal behavior being nonlinguistic, it does have non-verbal vocal elements such as tone, accent, tempo, pauses, intruding sounds, pitch and volume that create an effect on how the message is conveyed (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Schyns & Mohr, 2004). An additional element is chronemics which relates to the communication of time through behaviors like punctuality, pacing, promptness and responsiveness. Variations on these factors would all convey different interpretations of what time means to a certain person which could spotlight certain characteristics of their intentions for the other person (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Collectively, these elements demonstrate the scope of non-verbal communication, with researchers identifying numerous distinct cues. For example, according to Newman (2016), there are 27 listed non-verbal cues that include hand/ arm gestures, postural openness and body/leg shifting.

It is crucial to understand these non-verbal signals to better understand leadership behavior in organizational settings as they continuously are present, significantly impacting interactions by providing information, regulating communication flow, and expressing relational dynamics such as intimacy or authority (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016).

Corporate Leadership as an Interpersonal Construct

It is crucial to establish what a leader is in the business environment and what their role is in the organization. They are not simply a formal title or position, but rather they are figures with a high ability to influence others. As Robertson explains, leaders are those who create impact through influence rather than relying on authority alone (Robertson, 2020). This highlights a key distinction between management and leadership: while management is focused on organizing,

directing, and maintaining structure, leadership is more about nurturing, motivating, and developing people (Robertson, 2020). In modern business environments, this distinction becomes especially important, as success is increasingly tied to a leader's ability to influence rather than control. Authority may come from a position, but effective leadership is rooted in the ability to gain trust and inspire action (Robertson, 2020).

To lead effectively, a leader must continuously build this influence through informal methods, particularly by motivating their team to engage with tasks that may not be inherently appealing. This reflects the idea that leadership is “the art of leading someone to do what you want them to do because they want to do it” (Robertson, 2020). Rather than simply assigning tasks, leaders must help team members understand the purpose behind their work, convincing them why a challenging effort is necessary for the success of the organization (Robertson, 2020). When employees feel that their input matters and that they are contributing to the company's goals, their motivation increases significantly. This process relies heavily on communication and the development of trust, as leadership is built on shared understanding between leaders and their teams (Robertson, 2020). Employees are more willing to share ideas, knowledge, and perspectives when they trust their leadership, making trust essential for both individual and team performance. This trust is closely linked to how employees perceive their leaders' commitment to them, with research showing that employee loyalty is strongly correlated with the belief that employers genuinely care about their well-being. Communication from leadership plays a central role in building this perception and maintaining strong relationships (Robertson, 2020). In fact, leadership can be understood as a process of interpersonal influence achieved through symbolic communication directed toward relational and functional goals (Louw & Barker, 2021). Rather than existing solely within the leader, leadership emerges through interactions between leaders and followers, where both parties actively shape the relationship and influence one another's behavior (Louw & Barker, 2021). Leadership is therefore not a singular or static process, but a dynamic one that unfolds within specific contexts and situations, where direction and commitment are continuously constructed through interaction (Morrow et al., 2025).

This emphasis on interaction highlights that leadership is fundamentally relational and co-constructed, with followers playing an active role in shaping the leadership process itself. As Louw and Barker (2021) explain, followers are not passive recipients of influence, but rather

contributors to the leadership relationship who may alternately lead or follow depending on the situation. This reinforces the idea that leadership is distributed and situational, rather than concentrated solely in a formal position. In organizational contexts, this relational dynamic is particularly important as leadership effectiveness depends on trust, psychological safety, and the quality of interpersonal exchanges between individuals (Ha et al., 2025). When leaders create environments grounded in trust and mutual respect, they facilitate stronger collaboration and more effective knowledge sharing, which in turn enhances organizational learning and performance (Ha et al., 2025).

Within this relational framework, authentic leadership becomes particularly relevant. Authentic leadership is defined by the extent to which a leader can enact and embody their “true self,” with this embodied self-playing a central role in how authenticity is experienced by followers (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Self-awareness is a core component of this process, as leaders must understand their internal emotional states, motivations, and life experiences to express them in a coherent and meaningful way (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). This process involves what can be described as “connecting with the self,” drawing on emotional memories and bodily cues that are embedded within personal experience (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Importantly, authentic leadership is not simply about expressing inner feelings but about regulating and choosing how those feelings are communicated in response to contextual demands. For example, a leader may experience fear or anxiety in a high-pressure situation but still choose to communicate confidence and resolve, provided this expression aligns with what the situation requires. Without this self-awareness, emotional states may unintentionally be communicated through behavior, potentially undermining the leader’s credibility (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

This demonstrates that authenticity is not only internal, but also externally perceived. Even when a leader believes they are acting authentically, they may not be recognized as such if their behavior does not align with followers’ expectations of what leadership “looks like” in practice (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Research further suggests that appropriate expressions of vulnerability can strengthen leader–follower relationships, as they allow followers to identify more closely with the leader and develop higher levels of trust (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). At the same time, leaders must be cautious in how emotions are expressed, as strong negative emotions can have unintended consequences on the emotional state of others within the organization

(Nakamura & Milner, 2023). Leaders continuously send emotional signals through both verbal and non-verbal channels, and these signals shape how others interpret and respond to them (Nakamura & Milner, 2023).

Empathic leadership further reinforces this idea by emphasizing the importance of emotional attunement and responsiveness. Empathic leaders actively engage with the emotional cues of others through behaviors such as eye contact, attentive presence, and the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication to acknowledge others' experiences (Nakamura & Milner, 2023). These behaviors allow leaders to co-construct relational spaces characterized by mutual respect and inclusion, rather than one-way communication dominated by authority or instruction (Nakamura & Milner, 2023). However, this requires careful interpretation of emotional signals, as individuals may display conflicting verbal and non-verbal cues, making emotional understanding a complex interpretative process (Nakamura & Milner, 2023). As a result, leaders must not only be aware of others' emotional states but also regulate their own expressions in order to create psychologically safe environments in which individuals feel comfortable contributing ideas and expressing emotions (Nakamura & Milner, 2023).

The importance of communication as a relational process is further reinforced by the role of charisma and team influence in leadership effectiveness. Charismatic leaders can articulate a compelling vision, instill trust, and foster pride and motivation among followers, with their effectiveness largely dependent on followers' perceptions of their behavior (Eman et al., 2024). Through their communication and role-modelling behaviors, leaders shape how team members interact with one another and influence the overall quality of team communication (Eman et al., 2024). Over time, these shared perceptions can strengthen interpersonal attraction and alignment within teams, contributing to improved performance outcomes (Eman et al., 2024).

Importantly, these relational dynamics are not only cognitive or communicative but also embodied. Leadership is increasingly understood as a process that is experienced and enacted through the body, not solely through thought or speech (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). From this perspective, leadership emerges as a reciprocal and dynamic flow that is expressed through bodily interaction within organizational contexts (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). The body functions not only as a material presence, but as a sensing and expressive system that

communicates meaning through movement, posture, and emotional resonance (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). In this sense, leadership is not simply something a leader “has,” but something that is continuously enacted through embodied interaction within a social environment (Sweet et al., 2025). This embodied perspective further highlights that bodily behavior plays a critical role in how leadership is perceived and experienced. The body acts as both a sensor and a signal, enabling individuals to detect opportunities, threats, and social cues, while simultaneously communicating information to others within the group (Sweet et al., 2025). Through these bodily interactions, collective sensemaking occurs, allowing groups to align their efforts toward shared goals (Sweet et al., 2025). Leadership enactment therefore involves the intentional use of bodily behavior to communicate leadership presence, including traits such as confidence, integrity, and authenticity. Leaders must therefore be aware of how their physical presence and behavioral displays influence how they are perceived by others, as these signals can either reinforce or undermine their leadership effectiveness (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023).

The Critical Role of Body Language

Non-verbal communication accounts for around 60% to 93% of overall communication effectiveness and leaders spend between 70% and 90% of their time communicating. Thus, highlighting how much meaning is conveyed beyond words alone in a business environment (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). Leadership is often described as a “language game” where their spoken words are always supported by non-verbal cues, which are considered just as important, if not more important, than verbal communication in influencing how messages are understood (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016).

One of the most well-known theories regarding non-verbal communication is Albert Mehrabian’s model, which suggests that emotional meaning in communication is conveyed 7% through words, 38% through tone of voice, and 55% through body language, especially facial expressions (Wojtaszek, 2024; Robertson, 2020). According to Mehrabian, facial expression has the greatest impact, followed by tone of voice, which reinforces the idea that how something is said matters more than the actual words being used (Robertson, 2020). Similarly, other research shows that the overall impression a person makes is influenced by a combination of message content, tone of voice, and facial expression, with non-verbal elements playing a major role in

shaping perception (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). Some studies even suggest that more than 90% of communication is non-verbal, further highlighting its importance (Azhar, 2024).

These findings show that communication in business is not just about delivering information clearly, but also about how that information is presented. Non-verbal cues can reinforce a message, but they can also contradict it, which can affect how employees interpret and respond to leadership (Bonaccio et al. 2016). Non-verbal cues can signal attentiveness and understanding, reinforcing a leader's emotional connection with their team. Leaders who are able to express empathy through these cues can create an environment that supports employees' mental and emotional well-being, which in turn positively impacts productivity. In the same manner, an effective leader conveys warmth and empathy through their body language, thus creating the supportive and inclusive work environment their employees are looking for (Robertson, 2020). On the other hand, leaders who are less aware of or responsive to non-verbal signals may unintentionally create a sense of distance or disregard, which can harm team morale and reduce effectiveness (Azhar, 2024). Because of this, body language becomes a key factor in shaping trust, credibility, and effectiveness within organizations, making it an essential part of leadership communication (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016).

The Role of Non-verbal Communication in Leadership Effectiveness

Perception: Workers' and Self

The way leadership is understood is largely based on perception, as both employees and leaders interpret behaviors and form judgments that affect their interactions. Non-verbal communication plays a key role in shaping those perceptions which directly impacts both leadership effectiveness and the overall business environment (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). First, the way a leader perceives themselves is crucial, as it can affect their behavior, confidence, and ultimately their performance, which then influences employees and can impact their job satisfaction (Vazquez, 2014). For example, individuals who perceive themselves as having greater social power tend to demonstrate higher levels of performance and receive more positive social evaluations (Vazquez, 2014). This links closely to leadership emergence, which is often associated with visible behaviors such as confidence, dominance, and other power-related signals that are frequently communicated non-verbally (Vazquez, 2014).

First impressions are a critical part of this process, and they are largely formed through non-verbal communication. Research suggests that these impressions can be formed in as little as 100 milliseconds based on non-verbal cues alone (Robertson, 2020). Once established, these perceptions can be difficult to change, with negative first impressions sometimes taking up to six months of consistent interaction to change (Robertson, 2020). This highlights how quickly and powerfully non-verbal signals shape how leaders are perceived. Neurological research further supports this, showing that the areas of the brain responsible for processing emotions are activated by non-verbal signals, indicating that they are essential for interpreting others' intentions (Wojtaszek, 2024).

As a result, non-verbal communication strongly influences how messages are received and interpreted. Observers do not just process the content of a message, but also form interpretations based on the non-verbal cues that accompany it (Robertson, 2020). In leadership contexts, this becomes critical, as even subtle behaviors, like eye contact or a facial expression, can lead to an employee's particular perception of their leader's attitude, intentions, and credibility. Additionally, the way leaders direct their attention toward employees, such as through gaze and facial expression, can influence how those employees see themselves and their role within the organization (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). Perception acts as a key mechanism through which non-verbal communication affects leadership effectiveness, influencing both how leaders see themselves and how they are viewed by others.

Inconsistency Between Verbal and non-verbal Language in a Leader

Inconsistency between verbal and non-verbal communication can significantly undermine a leader's effectiveness and negatively impact the business environment. When there is a mismatch between what a leader says and what they express through body language, it can create confusion about their intentions and weaken the relationship between employees and management (Wojtaszek, 2024). Research shows that in situations where verbal and non-verbal messages conflict, people are more likely to trust the non-verbal signals, as they are often seen as more genuine and harder to control (Schyns & Mohr, 2004; Wojtaszek, 2024). This means that even if a leader communicates the "right" message verbally, contradictory body language can override it and lead employees to question their authenticity. As a result, a supervisor who does

not demonstrate consistency in their communication may struggle to build trust within their team (Wojtaszek, 2024).

This lack of alignment can also reduce a leader's authority and overall influence. Effective leadership requires the ability to adapt both verbal and non-verbal communication to the context and expectations of the team, and inconsistency between these elements can weaken how a leader is perceived (Wojtaszek, 2024). On an individual level, these inconsistencies can damage relationships that leaders have worked to build, potentially undoing trust and credibility over time (Robertson, 2020). This idea is supported by Mehrabian's findings, which suggest that when speech and behavior contradict each other, non-verbal communication has the strongest impact on how the message is interpreted, often leading to a negative perception (Robertson, 2020). This highlights that consistency between verbal and non-verbal communication is essential for effective leadership. Without it, leaders risk creating doubt, reducing trust, and ultimately weakening their ability to influence and guide their teams.

Implicit Leadership Theories and How Inconsistencies Affect

Implicit leadership theories (ILTs) are also a key part of how leaders are perceived, particularly in relation to non-verbal communication and consistency. ILTs refer to the preconceived ideas or stereotypes that individuals hold about what a "good" leader looks like, and these are often used as a reference point when evaluating leaders (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). Leaders who behave in ways that align with their followers' ILTs are more likely to gain support and be perceived as effective, while those who do not match these expectations may struggle to be seen as credible. A leader could interact effectively with others and the situation they are in, but still not be viewed as an authentic leader if the group does not interpret their behavior as fitting the expected image of "leaderly" embodiment (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Perception is central to this process, and non-verbal cues, especially facial expressions, are among the most influential factors in shaping these judgments (Trichas & Schyns, 2012).

Research shows that when a leader's non-verbal behavior, such as facial expressions, aligns with the expectations formed by followers' ILTs, they are more likely to be perceived as leader-like. In contrast, mismatches between these expectations and observed behavior can lead to lower leadership evaluations (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). This highlights how even subtle inconsistencies in non-verbal communication can affect how leadership is interpreted.

Additionally, ILTs are not universal and can vary depending on context and social factors. For example, different leadership prototypes may be applied when evaluating a 50-year-old male military leader compared to a 35-year-old female business leader, showing how expectations are shaped by age, gender, culture, and professional context (Trichas & Schyns, 2012).

In this sense, non-verbal communication becomes especially important, as it can either reinforce or challenge these existing stereotypes. Using non-verbal cues such as expressions of warmth or competence can help leaders, particularly those from underrepresented groups, overcome biased expectations and be perceived more positively (Bonaccio et al., 2016). However, when there is inconsistency between a leader's behavior and the expectations held by followers, it can negatively impact perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Leadership is not only about behavior itself, but also about how that behavior aligns with the implicit expectations of others, with non-verbal communication playing a key role in shaping these perceptions.

A Taxonomy of Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication in leadership refers to the transmission of meaning without spoken language and plays a central role in shaping leadership perception and effectiveness. It can be categorized into three primary channels: kinesics, paralanguage, and proxemics. Kinesics includes facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and posture. Paralanguage refers to vocal features such as pitch, tone, fluency, and speech rhythm. Proxemics refers to spatial behavior, including interpersonal distance and touch (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016; Bonaccio et al., 2016). These elements shape how a message is delivered and interpreted, adding meaning beyond the actual words being spoken. It communicates relational meaning such as inclusion, status, attention, and emotional engagement. Research highlights that both the presence and absence of positive non-verbal cues can significantly shape how individuals are socially evaluated within groups (Carney, 2022) The use of positive kinesics and paralanguage has been shown to enhance a leader's perceived trustworthiness, as these behaviors signal credibility, sincerity, and confidence (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). Research also shows that positive use of these cues is strongly associated with increased trust in leadership, which in turn is closely linked to higher perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). This relationship is particularly important because trust acts as a foundation for employee engagement and cooperation within teams. Given that non-verbal communication accounts for approximately

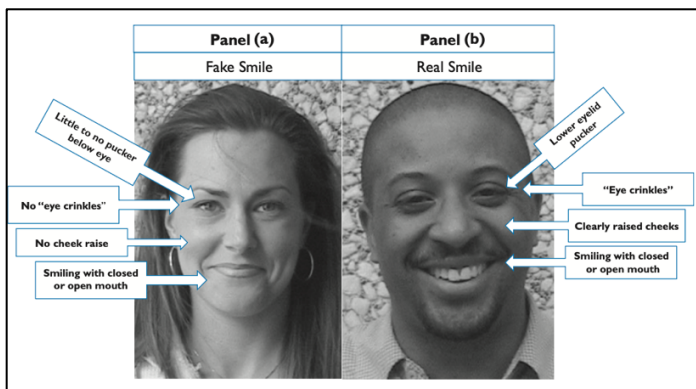
60% to 93% of overall communication effectiveness, the role of kinesics, paralanguage, and proxemics becomes even more significant in leadership contexts (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). As a result, leaders who can effectively manage their body language and vocal delivery are more likely to build trust, communicate clearly, and create a positive and productive work environment (Carney, 2022).

1. Kinesic Cues in Leadership Communication

1.1 Facial Expressions as Emotional and Social Signals

Facial expressions are a central component of kinesic communication because they convey emotional states, intentions, and relational attitudes. They influence leadership perception before verbal communication occurs and strongly shape impressions of trustworthiness and competence. Even subtle facial cues, such as pupil dilation, can communicate affection or positive regard (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). Positive facial expressions, particularly smiling, are associated with higher perceptions of warmth, charisma, and engagement (Trichas & Schyns, 2012; Schyns & Mohr, 2004). However, research distinguishes between genuine and non-genuine smiles: authentic expressions involve both mouth and eye engagement, while inauthentic smiles are often limited to mouth movement and lack full facial activation, reducing perceived sincerity (Carney, 2022).

FIGURE 1: Fake Smile vs. Real Smile



Carney, 2022

Negative or absent facial expressions also carry strong social meaning. Neutral facial expressions have been shown to reduce perceptions of trustworthiness; while frowning or emotionally closed expressions can create emotional distance between leaders and their teams (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). Even subtle negative expressions such as scowling or eyerolling can be interpreted as micro-level social exclusions. More importantly, the absence of positive expressions, such as not smiling, not acknowledging others visually, or not showing emotional engagement, can function as a form of relational exclusion, signaling disinterest or low value assigned to others (Carney, 2022). These effects are not limited to direct interaction, as observers can also interpret and internalize these cues when evaluating interpersonal dynamics. Facial expressions further influence emotional contagion and social perception. Negative expressions may increase threat-related processing in observers, while positive expressions promote affiliation and approach behavior (Vazquez, 2014). This suggests that positive facial expressions can help leaders build stronger emotional connections and create a more open and supportive work environment. However, inconsistencies between upper and lower facial expressions can create ambiguity in emotional interpretation, reducing perceived authenticity (Carney, 2022).

Certain facial expressions can communicate power and dominance. Lowered eyebrows and a non-smiling mouth, for example, have been associated with dominance and authority (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). While these expressions may strengthen perceptions of control, they can also trigger negative emotional responses in observers. Research shows that activation of the corrugator muscle, which creates a frown, can cause others to experience more negative emotions during interaction, whereas activation of the zygomatic muscle, which creates a smile, tends to produce more positive emotional reactions (Vazquez, 2014). This demonstrates that leaders' facial expressions do not only affect how they are perceived but can also subconsciously influence the emotional state of those around them. Supporting this, studies have shown that exposure to negative facial expressions can increase activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain associated with emotional processing and threat detection, which may lead to more negative behavioral responses in others (Vazquez, 2014).

Facial expressions can also influence perceptions of competence and leadership ability. When leaders display visible signs of stress, such as raised and tightened eyebrows or tension in facial muscles, they are often perceived as less competent, less attractive, and less decisive

(Trichas & Schyns, 2012). Sometimes a leader's resting face can come off in an aggressive manner. By consciously adjusting one's facial posture, for example, lightly placing one's thumb and forefinger on their chin, a leader can change how others interpret their furrowed brow. Rather than coming across as stern or critical, they are more likely to be perceived as reflective and attentive (Carney, 2022). High-power individuals are often expected to display fewer expressions of fear or sadness, as these emotions may be interpreted as signs of vulnerability or weakness (Vazquez, 2014). With that being said, leaders displaying a certain amount of vulnerability aids in being more relatable and increasing trust within their team (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

1.2 Eye Contact and Gaze Behavior

Looking at eye contact and gaze behavior can highlight various meanings in non-verbal communication. It can strongly influence leadership perception, authority, and employee response within the business environment. The way a leader uses eye contact often communicates confidence, attentiveness, and control before any words are spoken. Research suggests that effective eye contact involves maintaining it for around 90% of an interaction, as sustained and high-quality eye contact increases perceptions of engagement, confidence, and leadership presence (Robertson, 2020). Because of this, eye contact becomes an important tool for building credibility and establishing stronger connections with employees. The absence of eye contact, on the other hand, may be perceived as exclusion or disinterest. Leaders who consistently engage visually with some individuals but not others may unintentionally create perceptions of unequal value or social exclusion within groups (Carney, 2022). That lack of eye contact can communicate disinterest, discomfort, or disagreement, which may weaken a leader's perceived sincerity and reduce employee trust (Robertson, 2020).

Beyond engagement, gaze behavior can also communicate power and dominance. Studies show that individuals with high social power tend to maintain more eye contact while speaking and less while listening, a pattern often associated with dominance and authority (Vazquez, 2014). This behavior, sometimes referred to as visual dominance, has been linked to stronger influence and leadership effectiveness, particularly in how followers interpret confidence and control (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). However, other studies have said it is crucial that eye contact is

maintained while the leader is both speaking and listening. Reciprocal eye contact during listening is associated with higher perceived engagement and intelligence, as it signals attentiveness and cognitive involvement (Carney, 2022). Additionally, direct eye contact has been found to increase perceptions of coercive power, meaning employees may see leaders as having greater authority or control simply based on their gaze behavior (Schyns & Mohr, 2004).

Eye contact also plays an important role in feedback and communication between leaders and followers. The course, duration, and quality of eye contact can influence how feedback is received, whether employees feel comfortable sharing opinions, and how much control a leader appears to have in a conversation (Robertson, 2020). At the same time, observing employees' eye contact can provide leaders with valuable insight into unspoken reactions, agreement, or hesitation regarding a discussion or decision (Robertson, 2020). However, it is important to recognize that eye contact is highly impacted by culture. In some cultures, direct eye contact is viewed as a sign of confidence and respect, while in others it may be interpreted as disrespectful, aggressive, or uncomfortable (Vazquez, 2014). Eye contact and gaze behavior are critical leadership tools that lead to trust, authority, communication effectiveness, and employee perception across the business environment.

1.3 Gestures and Movement in Communication

Movement and gestures are another important part of non-verbal communication that can strongly impact how leaders are perceived in the workplace. The way a leader moves, uses their hands, or physically responds during communication can affect how clear, trustworthy, and persuasive they appear to employees. Certain movements can communicate specific emotional or social signals. For example, clenching fists may communicate anger or tension, leaning forward can signal respect, interest, or engagement, while leaning back may be interpreted as confidence or power (Vazquez, 2014). These physical movements often shape employee perceptions before the verbal message is fully processed.

There are different types of gestures that serve various types of communication purposes. Bonaccio et al. (2016) identify several forms of movement, including adaptors, emblems, and illustrators. Adaptors are self-touch behaviors, such as touching the face or hair. These actions can reveal internal emotional states such as stress or anxiety. Emblems are gestures with socially

recognized meanings, such as a thumbs-up to show approval. Illustrators are motions that support verbal communication and help make messages clearer and more engaging. Some examples could include using hands to emphasize key points, pointing to objects or people, showing size or direction with hand movements, or mimicking actions to help explain an idea (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Synchrony and subtle mimicry of others' behavior, when done naturally and not excessively, can increase perceived similarity, rapport, and interpersonal trust (Carney, 2022). Because leadership relies heavily on communication, these purposeful gestures can make leaders appear more confident, clear, and persuasive.

However, not all movement creates positive impressions. Research shows that excessive or uncontrolled movements can negatively affect leadership perceptions. For example, leaders who display too much head movement have been perceived as less emotionally stable, less conscientious, and less professional by observers (Robertson, 2020). In contrast, using controlled and deliberate non-verbal actions, such as purposeful gestures, as well as incorporating laughter, in an open and confident manner, can enhance others' perceptions of your status (Carney, 2022). The way movement is interpreted can also depend on its speed, intensity, and duration, meaning even small physical behaviors can affect how a leader is judged (Robertson, 2020). Similarly, certain gestures create stronger reactions than others. Finger pointing, for example, has been shown to create negative responses from audiences, while open-hand gestures communicate honesty, openness, and trustworthiness (Robertson, 2020; Newman, 2016). Research also shows that when gestures, particularly palm positions, are congruent with the words being spoken, leaders are seen as significantly more persuasive and credible (Newman, 2016). Additionally, a leader can facilitate conversations within the team by using those open-hand movements to encourage turn-taking in dialogue and thus create a more collaborative and communicative environment (Carney, 2022).

Leaders who use a strong combination of positive non-verbal behaviors, such as open palms, natural gesturing, eye contact, leaning forward, and expressive facial movements, tend to be perceived much more positively than leaders who communicate with limited or neutral physical expression (Robertson, 2020). This shows that movement and gestures do not simply support verbal communication, but actively shape how leadership is interpreted, influencing trust, credibility, and overall leadership effectiveness in the business environment.

1.4 Posture and Physical Stance

Posture and physical stance are also crucial in non-verbal communication. Research shows that positive and upright body posture benefits leaders in terms of both self-perception and workers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Vazquez, 2014). The way a leader physically carries themselves can communicate confidence, authority, and emotional control, all which sways how others respond to them. In particular, upright positions, such as standing tall with hands on hips, have been linked to increases in testosterone, which is associated with dominance and confidence, as well as decreases in stress hormones (Vazquez, 2014). Additionally, maintaining an upright posture has been shown to lower stress hormones, allowing leaders to handle difficult situations more calmly and deliver more effective motivational communication (Vazquez, 2014). This suggests that body posture does not only affect how others perceive a leader, but can also change the leader's own mindset, confidence, and ability to handle challenging situations effectively.

High-power postures are generally described as physically expansive positions, such as standing straight with a broad chest, shoulders back, and hands on hips (Bonaccio et al., 2016). According to Carney (2022), open body positions communicate trust and receptiveness, while leaning slightly toward others signals attentiveness and cognitive engagement. This forward orientation is also associated with perceptions of intelligence and interest in others. Vazquez (2014), similarly states combining open posture with leaning slightly forward can also communicate friendliness, attentiveness, and genuine interest, making employees feel more included in the interaction. Additionally, posture-related cues include chin position, where a slightly elevated chin is often interpreted as a signal of confidence and authority (Carney, 2022). These types of postures are often associated with confidence, leadership presence, and power-related behaviors. In contrast, low-power postures, such as standing hunched over with folded arms or a lowered head, can communicate insecurity, discomfort, or lack of confidence (Bonaccio et al., 2016). This can negatively affect how employees view a leader and may reduce their willingness to follow or trust them.

Even smaller posture-related behaviors can influence leadership perception. For example, a leader who appears tired, slouched, or physically disengaged may unintentionally communicate

a lack of interest or motivation, which can negatively impact team morale and credibility (Robertson, 2020). Similarly, studies have shown that standing with open legs or feet positioned shoulder-width apart is associated with greater confidence and persuasiveness compared to standing with legs or feet close together (Newman, 2016). Similarly, even subtle behavioral alignment, such as nodding while others speak, contributes to perceptions of attentiveness, agreement, and engagement. These behaviors collectively influence how leaders are evaluated in terms of competence and social presence. Posture and physical stance are not just physical behaviors, but important leadership signals that can lead to confidence, authority, employee inclusion, and overall leadership effectiveness within the workplace (Carney, 2022).

2. Paralanguage and Vocal Leadership Cues

Vocal delivery, or paralinguistics, is another key component of non-verbal communication that significantly impacts how leadership is perceived in the business environment. Elements such as pitch, tone, volume, and speech patterns can shape perceptions of authority, confidence, and emotional state, often within seconds of a leader speaking. For example, a lower pitch combined with downward tone endings is generally associated with greater authority, decisiveness, and leadership presence (Robertson, 2020). In contrast, rising intonation, often referred to as “uptalk,” where declarative statements end as if they were questions, is commonly linked to uncertainty and can weaken how confident a leader appears (Bonaccio et al., 2016). This suggests that even subtle changes in vocal delivery can significantly alter how leadership is interpreted.

Vocal cues also are an important role in how hierarchy and status are perceived within organizations. Research shows that listeners are often able to infer a speaker’s level of authority based solely on vocal characteristics such as pitch and volume, and that individuals may adjust their own vocal style depending on their position within the hierarchy (Bonaccio et al., 2016). This highlights how deeply embedded vocal communication is in organizational structure and perception. Additionally, dysfluencies such as pauses, hesitations, or filler sounds like “um” or “hmm” can convey involuntary emotions such as nervousness or uncertainty, further influencing how a leader is perceived (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Listening-related vocal cues are equally important. Backchannel responses such as “mm-hmm,” “yes,” or “ah-hah,” when used

appropriately, signal attentiveness and cognitive engagement, increasing perceptions of intelligence and involvement (Carney, 2022). Similarly, laughter, both expressing it and eliciting it in others, can enhance perceived social status and leadership presence. Additionally, the duration of the vocal behavior also communicates status and engagement. Longer speaking time can be associated with higher perceived power, although excessive dominance in speech may reduce perceptions of self-regulation. Conversely, speaking too little may signal lower authority. It is important to note that when one speaks, it must be during a time when they are sure they will not be interrupted, as that will also decrease their perceived authority (Carney, 2022).

The combination of vocal tone and non-verbal behavior also affects perceptions of leadership style. A softer tone combined with supportive non-verbal cues, such as nodding or open body language, can communicate empathy and approachability, while a firmer tone paired with more distant or closed body language tends to signal dominance and authority. This interaction between voice and body language shows that leadership perception is not based on a single cue, but on the alignment between multiple forms of communication. Vocal delivery plays a crucial role in shaping how leaders are perceived in terms of confidence, competence, and emotional intelligence.

3. Proxemics: Space, Distance, and Touch in Leadership

Distance, personal space, and touch are yet again critical forms of non-verbal communication. For example, the amount of physical space a leader keeps during interactions can affect how approachable, supportive, and authoritative they are perceived to be. Distance refers to the amount of space between two people, and research shows that individuals in high-power roles are often more willing to move into others' personal space as a way of communicating authority and confidence (Vazquez, 2014). Studies also show that reduced physical distance can have positive effects on relationship building, as leaders who maintain closer proximity to employees are often seen as more accessible and engaged. This stronger sense of connection has also been linked to higher follower performance and better team outcomes (Vazquez, 2014).

Physical closeness can therefore communicate both power and support, depending on how it is used. Research suggests that smaller physical distance is associated with greater

intimacy and stronger interpersonal connection (Carney, 2022; Schyns & Mohr, 2004). Conversely, the absence of proximity-related behaviors can communicate exclusion or lack of value assigned to others (Carney, 2022). Orientation also plays an important role. For example, side-by-side positioning is often associated with a higher degree of intimacy, collaboration, and partnership, while face-to-face positioning can sometimes feel more formal or confrontational depending on the situation (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). This shows that even the way a leader positions themselves physically can shape how employees experience the interaction.

Touch is another important non-verbal cue that can influence employee perceptions of leadership. A handshake, for example, often creates a first impression and can communicate confidence, openness, and goodwill. Research suggests that leaders who initiate a handshake may be seen as more dominant and self-assured (Vazquez, 2014). Similarly, social-polite touch, such as a firm handshake, is often preferred over weaker forms of contact because it communicates confidence and professionalism (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Beyond introductions, supportive touch combined with other positive non-verbal behaviors, such as speaking in a softer tone, smiling, maintaining eye contact, and nodding, has been linked to stronger perceptions of warmth, encouragement, and supportiveness (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). In contrast, keeping physical distance and leaning away can make leaders appear less supportive and emotionally distant (Schyns & Mohr, 2004).

Signals of Confidence vs Anxiety

Signals of confidence versus anxiety are often communicated through subtle non-verbal behaviors, which can significantly influence how leaders are perceived in the business environment. One of the most common indicators of nervousness or discomfort is self-touch behavior. Actions such as rubbing the eyes, scratching the head, or touching the face are often interpreted as signs of internal tension and a desire to reduce pressure in a situation (Robertson, 2020). These behaviors, known as self-adaptors, occur within a person's own personal space and are directed toward themselves, which can unintentionally signal anxiety or lack of confidence. When self-adaptors are frequent, they can weaken perceptions of authority and credibility, especially in leadership contexts where confidence is expected (Robertson, 2020). In contrast, alter-adaptors involve touching or adjusting another person, such as straightening a tie or

adjusting posture, and can be used to create comfort or ease in social interactions (Robertson, 2020).

Vocal behavior also plays a key role in signaling confidence or uncertainty. Dysfluencies such as hesitation, pauses, or unstable speech patterns can communicate uncertainty, even when the actual content of the message is strong. This means that how something is said can sometimes be more influential than what is being said. Similarly, physical movement can reveal emotional state. Increased foot movement, for example, has been linked to nervousness and anxiety, often signaling discomfort in a situation (Robertson, 2020). These subtle cues can reduce how competent and composed a leader appears to others.

On the other hand, controlled and stable body language is strongly associated with confidence and emotional regulation. Leaders who maintain steady posture, minimal unnecessary movement, and consistent expressions are more likely to be perceived as calm, composed, and in control. These behaviors reflect emotional stability, which is a key trait associated with high-status and effective leadership. In contrast, more reactive physical responses can be understood through broader behavioral patterns such as freeze, flight, or fight reactions, which differ in how individuals respond to stress or pressure. Sometimes even small, often unconscious non-verbal signals are vital in shaping perceptions of leadership confidence, competence, and authority (Robertson, 2020).

FIGURE 2: Summary of Positive Non-Verbal Behaviors and their Impact from Literature

Category	Specific Behavior	How It Is Perceived / Emotional Impact
Facial Expressions	Genuine Smile (mouth and eye engagement)	Charismatic, trustworthy, engaging, builds emotional connections. Triggers positive emotions in others, warmth
	Lightly placing thumb and forefinger on chin	Reflective and attentive (softens a resting furrowed brow)
	Subtle pupil dilation	Affection or positive regard.
Eye Contact & Gaze	Maintaining eye contact ~90% of the time	Engaged, confident, attentive, credible, has strong leadership presence.
	Visual dominance (More eye contact while speaking, less while listening)	High social power, dominant, authoritative, influential.
	Reciprocal eye contact while listening	Higher engagement, attentiveness, intelligence, cognitive involvement
	Direct eye contact	Coercive power, authority, control.
Posture & Stance	Upright/High-power posture (Standing tall, broad chest, shoulders back, hands on hips)	Confident, powerful, authoritative, emotionally controlled. (Physiologically lowers leader's stress).
	Slightly elevated chin	Confidence, authority
	Open posture leaning slightly forward	Friendly, attentive, genuinely interested; makes employees feel included.
	Standing with legs/feet shoulder-width apart	Greater confidence, highly persuasive.

FIGURE 2. Part 2

Movement & Gestures	Leaning forward	Respectful, interested, engaged.
	Leaning back	Confident, powerful.
	Controlled, deliberate, stable body language	Emotional stability, calm, composure, being in control, high status
	Illustrators (Hand motions to emphasize points, show size/direction)	Confident, clear, persuasive, engaging.
	Emblems (e.g., Thumbs-up)	Approval.
	Nodding while others are speaking	Attentiveness, agreement, engagement
	Open-hand/Open-palm gestures	Honest, open, trustworthy, credible (when aligned with words).
	Alter-adaptors (Adjusting/touching another to create comfort)	Creates social comfort, easing.
Distance & Space	Moving into personal space / Closer proximity	Accessible, engaged, authoritative, confident; builds personal relationships and team performance.
	Side-by-side positioning	Intimate, collaborative, a sense of partnership.
Touch	Firm, social-polite handshake (Leader-initiated)	Dominant, self-assured, confident, professional; creates good first impressions.
	Supportive touch (Combined with nodding/smiling)	Warm, encouraging, supportive.
Vocal Delivery	Lower vocal pitch with downward tone endings	Authoritative, decisive, strong leadership presence.
	Softer tone (Combined with supportive cues)	Empathetic, approachable.
	Incorporating laughter (naturally, openly)	Enhances perceived social status, leadership presence
	Longer speaking time (without dominating excessively)	Higher perceiver power, status
	Backchannel vocal responses (e.g., "mm-hmm", "yes")	Attentiveness, cognitive engagement, intelligence, involvement
	Steady, engaging, and stable vocal tone	Approachable, reliable, calm, composed, in control (emotional stability).

FIGURE 3: Summary of Negative Non-Verbal Behaviors and their Impacts from Literature

Category	Specific Behavior	How It Is Perceived / Emotional Impact
Facial Expressions	Neutral facial expressions	Reduced trustworthiness, emotionally distant.
	Frowning / Emotionally closed expressions (Lowered eyebrows, non-smiling mouth)	Dominant/controlling, but triggers negative team emotions and brain threat detection (amygdala).
	Inconsistencies between upper and lower face	Ambiguity in emotional interpretation, reduced authenticity
	Scowling or eye-rolling	Micro-level social exclusions
	Visible signs of stress (Raised/tightened eyebrows, facial muscle tension)	Less competent, less attractive, less decisive.
	Displaying fear or sadness	Vulnerable, weak (for high-power roles).
Eye Contact & Gaze	Lack of/avoiding eye contact	Disinterested, uncomfortable, insincere, disagreeing; reduces employee trust.
	Posture & Stance	
	Low-power posture (Hunched over, folded arms, lowered head)	Insecure, uncomfortable, lacking confidence; reduces employee willingness to follow.
	Tired, slouched, or physically disengaged stance	Lacking interest/motivation; negatively impacts team morale.
	Standing with legs/feet close together	Less confident, less persuasive.
Movement & Gestures	Clenching fists	Angry, tense.
	Adaptors/Self-touch (Touching face/hair, rubbing eyes, scratching head)	Anxious, stressed, tense, lacking confidence; weakens authority.
	Excessive/uncontrolled head or body movement	Emotionally unstable, less conscientious, less professional.
	Increased foot movement	Nervousness, anxiety, discomfort
	Finger pointing	Triggers negative, defensive audience responses.
Distance & Space	Maintaining too much physical/psychological distance	Formal, confrontational (if face-to-face), less effective, unsupportive, emotionally distant. Limits trust.
	Vocal Delivery	
	"Uptalk" (Rising intonation at the end of statements)	Uncertain, lacking confidence.
	Speaking too little	Lower authority
	Vocal dysfluencies (Pauses, hesitations, "um" or "hmm" fillers)	Nervous, uncertain, anxious.
	Firmer tone paired with closed body language	Strictly dominant, cold, unsupportive, emotionally distant.

Managing Non-Verbal Communication for Effective Leadership

Although non-verbal communication plays a significant role in leadership effectiveness, many of the behaviors associated with successful leadership can be developed and improved over time. Research suggests that non-verbal communication is not simply an innate ability, but rather a skill that can be strengthened through self-awareness, training, and practical experience. As a result, leaders can learn to become more conscious of the signals they send through their body language, vocal delivery, and interactions with others, allowing them to communicate more effectively and build stronger relationships within their teams (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023).

One of the most important ways to improve non-verbal communication is by increasing self-awareness. According to embodied leadership research, leadership is closely connected to the body, meaning that emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are reflected through physical actions and movement (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). Leaders who become more aware of their posture, facial expressions, gestures, and physical presence are better able to understand how they are perceived by others. This awareness can help them identify behaviors that may unintentionally communicate stress, disinterest, or lack of confidence and replace them with behaviors that project openness, confidence, and engagement (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). Leadership development programs can also help leaders strengthen their non-verbal communication skills. While traditional leadership training often focuses on developing specific competencies, some researchers argue that this approach may not fully prepare leaders for the complexity and unpredictability of modern organizations (Morrow et al., 2025). Instead, leadership development should provide opportunities for leaders to practice communication skills in realistic situations where leadership naturally emerges. By receiving feedback while actively participating in real or simulated leadership scenarios, individuals can better understand how their non-verbal behaviors affect others and learn how to adapt them more effectively (Morrow et al., 2025).

A growing area of research highlights the value of embodied learning in leadership development. Embodied learning focuses on learning through physical experience and movement rather than relying solely on verbal instruction or cognitive reflection (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). Through movement-based activities, leaders can become more aware of the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and physical behaviors. Research suggests that this

type of learning can help leaders become more present, self-aware, emotionally regulated, and responsive to others, all of which are important qualities for effective leadership (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). It can also help leaders recognize unnecessary tension or habits in their body language that may negatively affect how they are perceived. Related to this, studies have shown that movement itself can influence emotional states. Certain movement patterns can strengthen corresponding emotions, while observing or imagining those same movements can produce similar emotional responses (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023). This suggests that leaders can learn to better manage their emotional expression by understanding how their physical behaviors influence both their own emotions and the emotions of those around them. Developing this awareness may allow leaders to project greater confidence, calmness, and emotional stability during challenging situations (Payne & Jaaskelainen, 2023).

Creative approaches such as dance, theatre, and improvisation have also been identified as useful tools for leadership development. According to Zeitner (2016) dance could be used as a tool for leadership development as it allows individuals to explore communication through the body in a very direct and experiential way. Through engaging in the creative process of movement, people can become more aware of their use of physical expression to communicate and interact in different situations, which can strengthen their own self-awareness and that of others (Zeitner, 2016). It also supports the development of problem-solving skills, since dance often requires collaboration, adaptation, and responding to others in real time. In this sense, dance is not just about learning a set of movements or styles, but about generating and interpreting movement as a form of communication. The movement of the body is a form of dance, meaning it is something people already do in everyday life meaning that individuals are “always moving” in a communicative sense. Dance builds on this by making people more conscious of these everyday bodily patterns and developing what is known as kinaesthetic memory, which refers to the body’s ability to remember and reproduce movement-based knowledge. This type of embodied learning allows individuals to access forms of understanding that go beyond verbal or purely cognitive processes, as knowledge is experienced directly through physical action (Zeitner, 2016).

Similarly, improvisational theatre has been shown to improve several skills that are highly relevant to leadership. Research suggests that individuals who participate in improvisation

training become more adaptable, responsive, and capable of understanding different perspectives in complex situations. Because leadership often requires reacting to unpredictable circumstances and managing interpersonal dynamics in real time, these skills can help leaders communicate more effectively and respond more appropriately to the needs of others (Morrow et al., 2025).

In addition to formal training, leaders can consciously create communication environments that encourage positive non-verbal interactions. For example, establishing norms that encourage active listening, eye contact, and visible engagement during meetings can strengthen group communication and increase feelings of inclusion (Carney, 2022). Behaviors such as nodding while others speak, maintaining appropriate eye contact, and showing attentiveness through body language communicate respect and interest in what others have to say (Carney, 2022). These behaviors can also create synchrony within groups, where individuals become more aligned and connected through shared non-verbal actions. Research also highlights the importance of behaviors such as synchrony, mimicry, and balanced conversational turn-taking in building positive relationships (Carney, 2022). When leaders actively listen, encourage participation, and ensure that all team members have opportunities to contribute, employees are more likely to feel valued and included. Even small non-verbal actions, such as using an open-hand gesture to invite someone into a conversation or engaging in shared activities with colleagues, can strengthen interpersonal connections and improve communication quality (Carney, 2022).

METHODS

This exploratory research was conducted to either prove or question different variables that could come to explain what the significance of body language is in a leader in a business environment. The study utilizes a mixed descriptive research design consisting of a survey that was given to a mixture of business students, early career business employees, and managers or executives in business environments. The primary objective of the study is to identify which specific kinesic, paralanguage, and proxemic cues correlate with perceived leadership effectiveness and influence, if any and how they do so. By using the survey created, it is possible to explore and quantify whether the themes and patterns identified in the literature review were also reflected in real-world perceptions and experiences.

The study uses a purposive and convenience sampling approach to target individuals with experience in leadership or working with leaders in business settings. This method is suitable as it ensures participants have relevant, experience-based insights while also allowing efficient and practical access to a qualified sample, making it appropriate for the aims of the research. In order to capture a variety of perspectives from individuals with different levels of business exposure, participants were selected from three main groups: business students, early-career professionals currently working in business-related roles, and individuals in leadership positions such as managers or executives. Having this mixture of perspectives allows the study to explore professional views with emerging academic perspectives as well as different levels of leadership exposure and professional experience.

A total of 44 participants completed the survey. A full description of the final sample is presented in the Results section (see TABLE 1).

The survey, which was the tool used to collect the data, was an original, structured, electronic questionnaire that was created using google forms. The questions were created based on the key findings of literature on research of non-verbal communication, leadership perception, employee response, and leadership effectiveness; survey questions were designed to measure how individuals perceive different non-verbal behaviors in leadership contexts. The first section of the survey consisted of demographic questions, the second section used Likert-scale items, and the third section included A/B choice questions; together, these three parts formed the quantitative component of the exploratory study. The final part of the survey was open-ended questions. The questionnaire is provided in the appendix to illustrate its full structure and the exact questions used in the study.

The survey was distributed digitally through professional platforms and university channels. Participants were informed of the academic nature of the study and guaranteed anonymity to encourage honest reflections on sensitive topics like "coercive power" and "trustworthiness." Data was collected over a period of three months in 2026.

At the end of the collection period, the results were analyzed. The way this was done was by getting the average of each Likert-scale question's results. For example, if 44 people answered, the sum of their responses was calculated and then divided by 44. The mode and standard deviation were also included to help in the interpretation. Additionally, the data analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine differences and relationships

across demographic variables. First, descriptive statistics were calculated by gender, age, and cultural background to summarize mean responses across all survey items. To test for statistically significant differences between two groups, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted for gender comparisons. For variables with more than two groups, Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to analyze differences across age and cultural background categories. In addition, regression analysis was performed to assess the extent to which gender, age, and cultural background were associated with responses to the most relevant questionnaire items, allowing for the identification of potential predictive relationships between demographic factors and perceptions of non-verbal leadership communication.

The qualitative responses to the two open-ended survey questions were analyzed using a simple content analysis approach. Given the relatively short length of the answers, the analysis was primarily conducted through systematic word and phrase identification. Recurring terms and expressions (e.g., “eye contact,” “posture,” “confidence,” “distraction,” “active listening”) were manually coded and grouped into broader themes reflecting perceived ineffective and effective leadership non-verbal behaviors. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small-scale dataset, triangulation was not conducted. This means that the coding and interpretation of responses were not independently verified by a second researcher.

RESULTS

1. Demographics

There was a total of 44 (=n) respondents. The demographics of the participants are shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: Respondent Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Professional Role	Business Student	13	29.5%
	Early Career in Business	15	34.1%

	Manager / Executive / Professor	16	36.4%
Gender	Female	23	53.5%
	Male	19	44.2%
	No Response	1	2.3%
Age	20–29	26	60.5%
	30–39	1	2.3%
	40–49	1	2.3%
	50–59	10	23.3%
	60+	4	9.3%
	No Response	1	2.3%
Cultural Background	Europe	23	53.5%
	North America	17	39.5%
	South/Central America	1	2.3%
	Africa	1	2.3%
	No Response	1	2.3%

*Note: One participant did not respond the whole demographics section (age, gender, cultural background) of the survey so only 43 respondents are accounted for in this table.

2. Likert Scale Questions Consensus

The first part of the Survey was comprised of 15 questions that were formatted in the Likert-Scale from 1 to 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. In this first part of

the analysis basic descriptive statistics were calculated. The mode helps highlight what the most popular answer was for each question respectively. The Standard Deviation is helpful because it allows to see how spread out the responses were from the average/mean

TABLE 2: Mean, Mode, Standard Deviation

Q.	Survey Statement (Abbreviated)	Mean	Interpretation of participants' opinions in comparison to each other	SD	Mode	Interpretation of participant's opinions in relation to statement (Likert-Scale)
1	Non-verbal communication is as important as technical knowledge for team effectiveness	3.91	General Agreement	1.17	5	Strongly Agree
2	My "ideal image" of a leader includes specific non-verbal traits (e.g., a certain way of walking or sitting).	3.72	General Agreement	1.03	4	Agree
3*	Inconsistency between a leader's verbal message and their non-verbal cues causes me to lose trust in their leadership.	4.09	Strong Agreement	.89	4	Agree

4	When a leader's words contradict their body language, I am more likely to believe their body language	3.79	General Agreement	1.00	4	Agree
5	A leader who lowers their eyebrows while speaking is perceived as more dominant.	2.95	Slight Disagreement	.722	3	Neutral
6	A leader appears less determined or attractive if they look "stressed" (e.g., raised/pulled eyebrows).	3.6	General Agreement	1.00	3	Neutral
7*	Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness.	4.09	Strong Agreement	1.06	5	Strongly Agree
8	An erect and positive body posture is essential for a leader to be seen as effective.	3.77	General Agreement	1.09	4	Agree
9*	Constant, direct eye contact from a leader feels like an exercise of "coercive power" or intimidation.	2.69	Disagreement	1.32	2	Disagree

10	I perceive a leader as more "influential" if they maintain eye contact while speaking but look away more while listening.	2.81	Disagreement	1.28	2	Disagree
11	In a business setting, a neutral facial expression makes a leader seem less trustworthy.	2.67	Disagreement	.94	3	Disagree
12*	A leader who stands closer to their subordinates is perceived as being more supportive.	3.79	General Agreement	.94	4	Agree
13	A leader who leans backward during a conversation is perceived as exercising power rather than showing respect.	2.93	Slight Disagreement	1.08	2	Disagree
14	Specific behaviors like nodding and "sympathetic smiling" are the primary ways I	3.81	General Agreement	.96	4	Agree

	identify a supportive leader.					
15*	A leader who frequently looks away or turns away during a meeting is perceived as disinterested or dismissive.	4.05	General Agreement	.95	4	Agree

*Questions with this symbol are referencing statistically significant differences in opinion between different professional groups (FIGURE 5)

3. Likert Scale Questions Individually

3.1 Breakdown of Likert-Scale Selection

To properly analyze the results of each question, it is crucial that the statements are evaluated individually to observe the breakdown of the respondents' answers.

FIGURE 4: Percentage of Chosen Answers on the Likert-Scale in Survey (1 being strongly disagree, 5 being strongly agree)

	1	2	3	4	5
Q1: a leader's non-verbal is as important as technical skills	2.3%	14%	16.3%	25.6%	41.9%
Q2: My ideal image of a leader includes specific nonverbal traits	4.7%	7%	20.9%	46.5%	20.9%
Q3: inconsistency between a leader's verbal message and their nonverbal cues causes me to lose trust in their leadership	2.3%	2.5%	14%	46.5%	34.9%
Q4: When a leader's words contradict their body language, I am more likely to believe their body language	2.4%	9.5%	19%	45.2%	23.8%
Q5: A leader who lowers their eyebrows while speaking is perceived as more dominant	2.3%	20.9%	55.8%	20.9%	0%
Q6: a leader appears less determined or attractive if they look stressed	0%	14%	34.9%	27.9%	23.3%
Q7: Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness	4.7%	4.7%	9.3%	39.5%	41.9%
Q8: An erect and positive body posture is essential for a leader to be seen as effective	4.7%	4.7%	30.2%	30.2%	30.2%
Q9: Constant, direct eye. Contact from a leader feels like an exercise of "coercive power" or intimidation	23.3%	25.6%	18.6%	23.3%	9.3%

Q10: I perceive a leader as more “influential” if they maintain eye contact while speaking but look away more while listening	14%	34.9%	20.9%	16.3%	14%
Q11: In a business setting, a neutral facial expression makes a leader seem less trustworthy	11.6%	30.2%	37.2%	20.9%	0%
Q12: A leader who stands closer to their subordinate is perceived as being more supportive	0%	11.6%	20.9%	44.2%	23.3%
Q13: A leader who leans backward during a conversation is perceived as exercising power rather than showing respect	7%	32.6%	27.9%	25.6%	7%
Q14: Specific behaviors like nodding and “sympathetic smiling” are the primary ways I identify a supportive leader	0%	9.3%	27.9%	34.9%	27.9%
Q15: A leader who frequently looks away or turns away during a meeting is perceived as dismissive	0%	9.3%	14%	39.4%	37.2%

For Question 1, respondents showed a strong overall agreement that a leader’s non-verbal communication is just as important as their technical business knowledge for team effectiveness. For Question 2, respondents generally agreed that their “ideal image” of a leader includes specific non-verbal traits.

For Question 3, respondents showed strong agreement that inconsistency between a leader’s verbal message and their non-verbal cues can reduce trust in their leadership. These findings suggest that the large majority of participants place significant importance on communication consistency, reinforcing the idea that trust in leadership is strongly influenced by the alignment between what leaders say and what their body language communicates.

For Question 4, respondents showed a clear tendency to prioritize non-verbal cues when a leader’s words contradict their body language.

For Question 5, respondents generally showed a neutral stance regarding whether a leader who lowers their eyebrows while speaking is perceived as more dominant. These findings suggest that eyebrow lowering is not a strongly or consistently interpreted signal of dominance among participants, reflecting ambiguity in how this facial expression is perceived in leadership contexts.

For Question 6, respondents showed a moderate tendency to agree that a leader appears less determined or attractive when they display “stressed” facial expressions such as raised or pulled eyebrows.

For Question 7, respondents showed strong agreement that frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases perceived charisma and trustworthiness.

For Question 8, respondents displayed a balanced range of opinions regarding whether an erect

and positive body posture is essential for a leader to be seen as effective. This suggests that while many participants view upright posture as an important component of effective leadership, there is also a significant level of neutrality, indicating that posture alone may not be universally considered essential in shaping perceptions of leadership effectiveness.

For Question 9, respondents showed mixed perceptions regarding whether constant, direct eye contact from a leader feels like an exercise of “coercive power” or intimidation. These results highlight a divided set of opinions, with no dominant consensus on whether direct eye contact is experienced as intimidating in leadership contexts.

For Question 10, respondents showed a slight tendency toward disagreement regarding whether a leader is perceived as more “influential” if they maintain eye contact while speaking but look away more while listening.

For Question 11, respondents generally showed a tendency toward disagreement regarding whether a neutral facial expression makes a leader seem less trustworthy in a business setting.

For Question 12, respondents showed clear agreement that a leader who stands closer to their subordinates is perceived as more supportive in a business setting. This spotlights that most participants perceive closer physical proximity as a supportive leadership behavior, reinforcing the importance of spatial non-verbal cues in shaping leadership perceptions in business environments.

For Question 13, the largest proportion of participants, 32.6%, selected 2 (disagree), suggesting that many do not interpret backward leaning as a sign of dominance or reduced respect.

For Question 14, respondents generally showed agreement that specific behaviors such as nodding and “sympathetic smiling” are primary ways of identifying a supportive leader.

Evaluating these results could lead to inferring that most participants associate nodding and sympathetic smiling with supportive leadership, reinforcing the importance of affiliative non-verbal behaviors in shaping perceptions of leader supportiveness in business contexts.

For Question 15, respondents showed strong agreement that a leader who frequently looks away or turns away during a meeting is perceived as disinterested or dismissive. Therefore, this shows that participants strongly associate reduced eye contact and turning away with a lack of interest or attentiveness, reinforcing the importance of sustained engagement cues in leadership perception within business settings.

3.2 Analysis of Mean Scores Across Demographic Characteristics

1. General Descriptive Statistics by Gender (1-Female, 2- Male)

TABLE 3: General Descriptive Statistics by Gender

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Q1	44	3,9318	1,16933	1,00	5,00
Q2	44	3,7500	1,03710	1,00	5,00
Q3	44	4,0682	,89955	1,00	5,00
Q4	43	3,7674	,99612	1,00	5,00
Q5	44	2,9545	,71380	1,00	4,00
Q6	44	3,6136	,99337	2,00	5,00
Q7	44	4,0909	1,05253	1,00	5,00
Q8	44	3,7727	1,07538	1,00	5,00
Q9	44	2,7273	1,31827	1,00	5,00
Q10	44	2,8636	1,30457	1,00	5,00
Q11	44	2,7273	,99682	1,00	5,00
Q12	44	3,7727	,93668	2,00	5,00
Q13	44	2,9318	1,06526	1,00	5,00
Q14	44	3,8409	,96311	2,00	5,00
Q15	44	4,0455	,93894	2,00	5,00

2. Analysis of Statistics

a. Mann-Whitney Test for Gender Variable

To determine whether statistically significant differences existed between male and female respondents, an independent samples test was conducted. Statistical significance was assessed using the asymptotic significance value (p-value), with a significance level of 0.05 corresponding to a 95% confidence level. As shown in Table 4, results showed that only Question 3, “Inconsistency between a leader's verbal message and their nonverbal cues causes me to lose trust in their leadership,” produced a statistically significant difference between genders ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that male and female participants differed significantly in their mean responses to this statement. Therefore, gender appears to influence how strongly individuals perceive inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal communication as a factor affecting trust in leadership, whereas no statistically significant gender differences were found for the remaining survey items.

TABLE 4: Results of Mann-Whitney Test for Gender as a Category

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
U de Mann-Whitney	217,000	229,500	112,000	148,000	185,500	200,500	192,000	169,500	224,000	215,500	213,000	191,000	164,000	218,000	204,500
W de Wilcoxon	427,000	505,500	322,000	338,000	395,500	410,500	402,000	379,500	500,000	491,500	489,000	401,000	374,000	494,000	414,500
Z	-,333	-,013	-3,085	-1,880	-1,205	-,749	-,995	-1,538	-,150	-,364	-,434	-1,008	-1,674	-,305	-,661
Sig. asin. (bilateral)	,739	,990	,002	,060	,228	,454	,320	,124	,881	,716	,665	,314	,094	,760	,508

a. Variable de agrupación: Gender_categorica

b. Kruskal-Wallis For Age Variable

Since there are more than two groups within the age variable, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine the results. As with the gender analysis, statistical significance was determined using the asymptotic significance value (p-value), with a threshold of $p < 0.05$ corresponding to a 95% confidence level. As shown in Table 5, the results indicated that only Question 7, “Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness,” showed a statistically significant difference among the groups ($p < 0.05$). This finding suggests that participants from at least one demographic group differed significantly in their mean ranking of this statement compared to the others. Therefore, demographic background appears to influence perceptions regarding the effect of a leader’s smiling behavior on charisma and trustworthiness, while no statistically significant differences were observed for the remaining survey items.

TABLE 5: Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test for Age as a Category

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
H de Kruskal-Wallis	1,794	5,327	6,189	5,489	2,394	,866	12,496	,844	7,047	6,834	4,267	3,183	1,900	1,960	1,000
gl	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Sig. asin.	,774	,255	,185	,241	,664	,929	,014	,932	,133	,145	,371	,528	,754	,743	,910

Following the significant difference identified in Question 7, additional pairwise comparisons were performed among the age groups to determine which specific groups differed from one another. The results of these comparisons are presented below in Table 6.

TABLE 6: Comparison of Age Groups

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Standard Error	Standardized Test Statistic	P-Val	Adjusted P-Val
30-39;	16,000	16,872	,948	,343	1,000
40-49;	16,000	16,872	,948	,343	1,000
30-39;20-29	25,333	12,149	2,085	,037	,556
40-49;20-29	25,333	12,149	2,085	,037	,556
30-39;40-49	,000	16,872	,000	1,000	1,000
30-39;60+	-12,500	13,338	-,937	,349	1,000
30-39;50-59	-17,400	12,512	-1,391	,164	1,000
40-49;60+	-12,500	13,338	-,937	,349	1,000
40-49;50-59	-17,400	12,512	-1,391	,164	1,000
60+-	3,500	13,338	,262	,793	1,000
60+;50-59	4,900	7,058	,694	,488	1,000
60+;20-29	12,833	6,392	2,008	,045	,670
;50-59	-1,400	12,512	-,112	,911	1,000
;20-29	-9,333	12,149	-,768	,442	1,000
50-59;20-29	7,933	4,416	1,796	,072	1,000

Each row of the pairwise comparison test evaluates the null hypothesis that the distributions of responses for Age Group 1 and Age Group 2 are equal. The table reports the asymptotic significance values (two-tailed tests), using a significance level of 0.05. To account for the increased risk of Type I error associated with multiple comparisons, Bonferroni correction was applied to the significance values.

The results (Table 6) indicate statistically significant differences between the 20–29 age group and the 30–39, 40–49, and 60+ age groups respectively. No other pairwise comparisons reached the same statistical significance. These findings suggest that younger respondents (aged 20–29) differ significantly from several older age groups in their perceptions of the statement: “Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness.” The results indicate that the youngest participants hold views that are distinct from those of older respondents regarding the impact of smiling on leadership charisma and trustworthiness.

c. Cultural Background

Using the Kruskal-Wallis test once again, we compare the responses of different cultural backgrounds.

TABLE 7: Kruskal Wallis Test Results for Cultural Background as a Category

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
H de Kruskal-Wallis	2,842	1,102	3,344	4,354	2,695	2,450	6,374	2,436	2,662	1,294	,977	3,815	3,010	1,997	3,072
gl	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Sig. asin.	,417	,777	,342	,226	,441	,484	,095	,487	,447	,731	,807	,282	,390	,573	,381

The results show that none of the survey questions exhibit statistically significant differences across cultural groups. This indicates that cultural background, within the sample studied, does not appear to influence participants' responses to the variables measured.

3. Regression Analysis

The regression analysis was conducted to identify potential associations and statistically significant relationships between the explanatory variables (age, gender, and cultural background) and the most relevant survey items. The analysis focused on the first four questions of the questionnaire, as these were considered the most general and foundational in relation to the study's objectives. The aim was to examine whether age, gender, and cultural background are associated in any way with the importance participants assign to a leader's body language.

Questions 1 and 2 did not show statistically significant regression models and, with p-values above 0.1, indicating that none of the explanatory variables (age, gender, or cultural background) were significantly associated with these items.

However, for questions 3 and 4, the regression analysis delivered statistically significant models.

For question 3, the resulting model was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.031) and explained 13% of the variance in the question values. As shown in Table 8, of the three socio-demographic variables, only Gender showed a statistically significant association at the 95% level (p-value = 0.005), and this association was negative and very high

(β coefficient = -0.771) indicating that Gender has a strong influence on the overall model which likely explains why the model as a whole is significant and can be validated.

TABLE 8: Q3 Regression Analysis Results

Model		Non- Standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4,930	,555		8,881	<,001
	Gender_category	-,771	,259	-,428	-2,979	,005
	Age_category	,049	,088	,084	,559	,580
	Cultural_category	,087	,134	,099	,653	,518

a. Dependent Variable: Q3

Given the way Gender was categorized (Female = 1 and Male = 2) its negative β coefficient indicates that males score lower than females on question 3. Therefore, females show higher levels of agreement with the statement, indicating that they are more likely to lose trust in a leader when verbal and nonverbal cues are inconsistent. Males, in comparison, report lower agreement, suggesting they are less affected by such inconsistencies in leadership communication.

For question 4, the resulting model was also statistically significant at the 90% confidence level (p-value = 0.065) and explained 10.6% of the variance in the question values. As shown in Table 9, both Gender (p-value = 0.058) and Cultural Background (p-value = 0.073) showed a statistically significant association at the 90% level. Gender association with question 4 was negative and high (β coefficient = -0.580) indicating that Gender has a strong influence on the overall model compared to Cultural Background that showed a positive and significant weigh of 0.281.

TABLE 9: Q4 Regression Analysis Results

Model		Non- Standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3,942	,632		6,238	<,001
	Gender_category	-,580	,296	-,290	-1,958	,058
	Age_category	,065	,099	,102	,654	,517
	Cultural_category	,281	,153	,286	1,842	,073

a. Dependent Variable: Q4

Given the way Gender was categorized (Female = 1 and Male = 2) its negative β coefficient indicates that males score lower than females on question 4. The categorization of the Cultural Background variable (Europe = 1, South / Central America = 2, North America = 3, Africa = 4) reveals that lower categories (namely Europe) tend to value question 4 lower. This suggests that women are more likely than men to trust a leader's body language over their verbal message when inconsistencies arise, and that Europeans are less likely to prioritize body language in such situations compared to other cultural backgrounds.

4. Comparison Between Professional Groups

An additional part of the analysis includes analyzing from the three different professional perspectives. The FIGURE (4) below compares the average score (on the Likert-Scale, 1-5) that each professional group (Business Students, Early Career in Business, and Managers/Executives/Professors) gave each question. While the three groups were mostly in agreement for each question there are some questions where there are notable differences.

Managers/Executives scored highest on **Q3** (trust lost when verbal and non-verbal cues are inconsistent) with an average of 4.25, suggesting more experienced professionals are especially sensitive to communication inconsistency.

Business Students scored highest on **Q7** (smiling increases charisma/trustworthiness) with an average of 4.42, showing they strongly associate positive facial expression with leadership. This finding is consistent with the Kruskal-Wallis test done previously. The age-based pairwise comparisons showed that younger respondents (20–29) differed significantly from older age groups in their responses to Question 7. This convergence suggests that younger and less professionally experienced

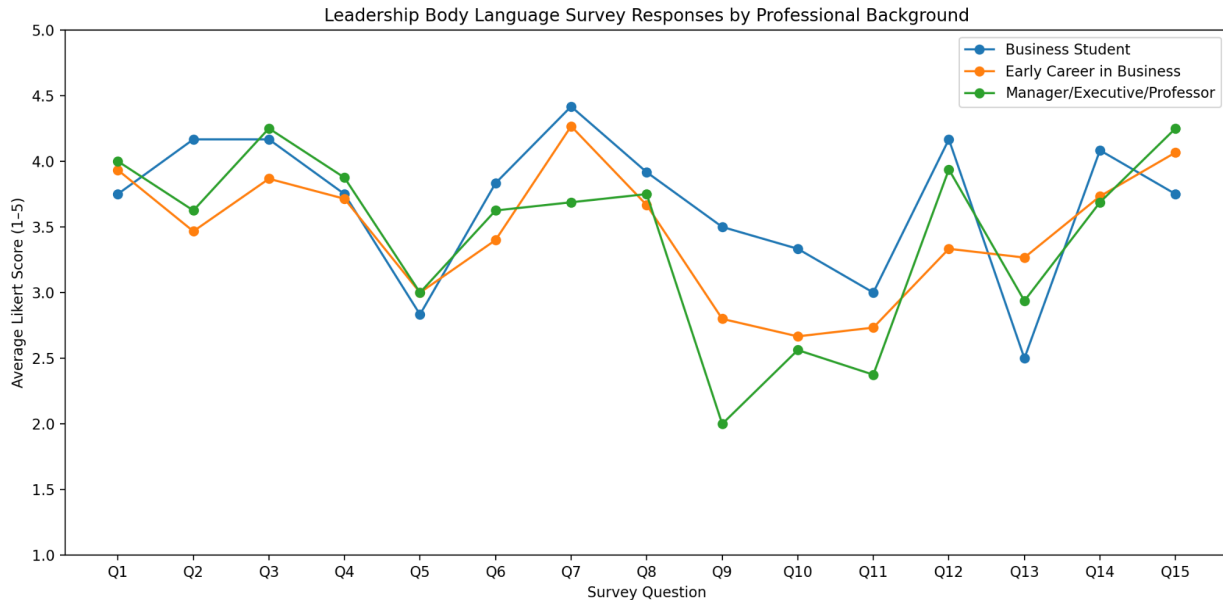
participants tend to place greater importance on visible positive non-verbal cues such as smiling when evaluating leadership charisma and trustworthiness.

Students also rated coercive eye contact higher (Q9 = 3.5) than managers (2.0), which may suggest younger or less experienced professionals interpret intense eye contact differently.

In relation to whether standing closer makes a leader seem more supportive Q12, early career professionals rated it much lower (3.33/5) than business students (4.17) or experienced professionals (3.94), possibly suggesting early-career employees may value professional boundaries more or may still be adjusting to workplace power dynamics.

Managers scored highest on Q15 (looking away signals disinterest) with 4.25, indicating experienced professionals are highly aware of gaze behavior in leadership.

FIGURE 5



Just like for the other three socio-demographic variables, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine the statistical significance of differences in means for each question. As shown in Table 10, the results indicated that only Question 7, “Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness,” Questions 9, “Constant, direct eye contact from a leader feels like an exercise of "coercive power" or intimidation,” and Question

12, “A leader who stands closer to their subordinates is perceived as being more supportive” showed a statistically significant difference among the groups ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE 10: Statistical Significance Among Different Professional Groups

	Asymp.Sig
Q1	.914
Q2	.091
Q3	.260
Q4	.768
Q5	.719
Q6	.452
Q7	.038
Q8	.804
Q9	.007
Q10	.161
Q11	.168
Q12	.047
Q13	.172
Q14	.340
Q15	.389

A further analysis by pairs of professional roles in questions 9 and 12 resulted in that business students are those that significantly differ from other groups in the perception of direct eye contact. Those that significantly differ in Q9 are Business Students from Experienced Professionals. For Q12 it is Early Career Professionals who differ from Business Students.

TABLE 11: Pairwise Comparisons for Role of Q9

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Standard Error	Standardized Test Statistic	P-Val.	Adj. P-Val
Manager/Executive/Professor-Early Career in Business	8,029	4,501	1,784	,074	,223
Manager/Executive/Professor-Business Student	14,639	4,677	3,130	,002	,005
Early Career in Business-Business Student	6,610	4,746	1,393	,164	,491

TABLE 12: Pairwise Comparisons for Role of Q12

Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistics	Standard Error	Standard Test Statistic	P-Val	Adj. P-Val
Early Career in Business-Manager/Executive/Professor	-8,702	4,367	-1,992	,046	,139
Early Career in Business-Business Student	10,387	4,605	2,256	,024	,072
Manager/Executive/Professor-Business Student	1,685	4,538	,371	,710	1,000

5. A/B Response Questions

For the second part of the survey there were three questions that had the respondents choose the option they most agreed with.

The first question was:

“In your view, can a leader be "effective" if they have poor body language but excellent technical skills?”

- a) Yes results are all that matter
- b) No, leadership requires emotional connection through non-verbal cues.

The results to this question are 79.5% of respondents saying, “b. No” and 20.5% of them saying, “a. Yes.” This means that nearly 4 out of every 5 participants believed that technical skill alone is not enough to make someone an effective leader. Instead, most respondents felt that leadership also requires the ability to connect with others through non-verbal communication, emotional presence, and interpersonal influence.

In relation to the differing professional experience perspectives, 91.7% of business students, 66.7% of early career professionals, and 81.3% of experienced professionals agreed that body language matters. The fact that 91.7% of business students chose the option that said body language matters, could suggest that younger professionals or future leaders place a high value on emotional intelligence, approachability, and relational leadership. In comparison to young professionals who chose results are all that matters (33%) suggests that individuals in the early stages of their careers may be more focused on productivity, technical competence, and measurable outcomes as they are still adjusting and adapting to their new workplace environment. However, even among experienced leaders, 81.3% believed poor body language limits leadership effectiveness. This is particularly important because these participants likely have firsthand leadership experience. Their responses suggest that people who actually lead teams recognize that influence, trust, and communication are critical parts of leadership beyond technical ability.

TABLE 13: Q16 Analysis Through Differing Professional Perspectives

Professional Role	No – Body Language Matters	Yes – Results Matter
Business Students (n = 12)	11 (91.7%)	1 (8.3%)
Early Career Professionals (n = 15)	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)
Managers/Executives (n = 16)	13 (81.3%)	3 (18.7%)

The second question of this section was:

“Do you believe there is a "standard" body language for a leader, or should it change based on the team?”

- a) Fixed standard (A leader should always look a certain way)
- b) Situational (A leader should adapt their cues to the context)

The results of this question are unanimous with 100% of respondents answering, “b. Situational.” This means that regardless of experience, participants do not believe there is one universal leadership style, and leaders should adapt to their team’s needs.

The third question of this section was:

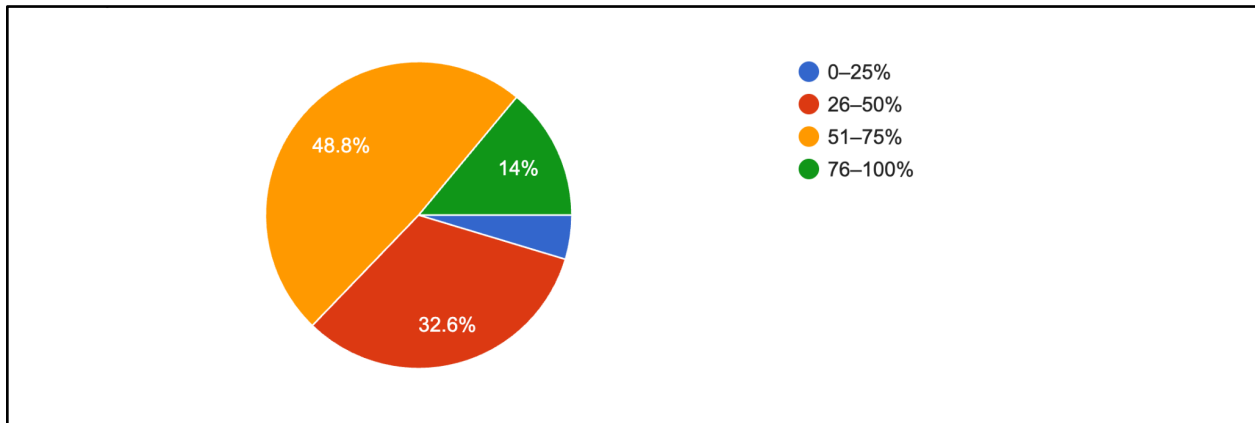
“In your opinion, how much does a leader’s non-verbal presence contribute to their "Influence" over others?”

- a) 0–25%
- b) 26–50%
- c) 51–75%
- d) 76–100%

The results indicate that 48.8% of respondents believe that a leader’s non-verbal presence contributes 51-75% of their influence over others, and 32.6% believe it contributes 26-50%. Additionally, 14% believe it contributes 76-100% which means that 62% of respondents believe that non-verbal communication’s contribution to a leader’s influence is over 50%. Nearly half of those chose this range, suggesting that while non-verbal is not the only factor, it is considered the majority stakeholder in how influence is projected and only 4.6% of respondents felt that non-verbal language plays a minor role, indicating that the "silent" aspect of leadership is almost universally recognized as significant.

Continuously, 25% of experienced professionals believe influence is 76%–100% non-verbal. This suggests that the longer someone is in a leadership role, the more they realize that how they show up matters as much as, or more than, what they say. Business students sit in the middle, with 50% believing influence is in the 51%–75% range. Over half (53.3%) of early career professionals placed it in the 26%–50% range.

FIGURE 6: Participant Perceptions of Non-verbal Communication in Leadership Influence



6. Open Ended Questions

The last part of the survey consists of two open ended questions.

The first being:

“Describe one specific non-verbal habit you have observed in a leader that made them appear ‘Ineffective.’”

Respondents frequently cited "distracted" behaviors, such as a lack of eye contact, sitting slouched in their chair, checking mobile phones, looking at other papers, or writing reminders during a conversation, as significant indicators of ineffectiveness. Additionally, physical signs of anxiety or uncertainty, such as fidgeting with hands or hair and a slow, indecisive vocal pace, were noted as habits that diminish a leader’s authority.

The second question being:

“What is the #1 non-verbal trait you expect to see in a ‘Great Leader’?”

When business students and early-career professionals were asked to define the primary non-verbal trait of a great leader, the responses converged on the themes of active engagement and physical confidence. Eye contact was the most overwhelmingly cited requirement, described not as a tool for intimidation but as a fundamental sign of respect, attention, and "social intelligence." Furthermore, the mention of "good posture," "calm movements," and "using hands to empower words" suggests that followers expect a leader to project a sense of controlled energy. By combining these traits with supportive cues like nodding and physical proximity, a leader establishes a non-verbal profile of a "supportive authority."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to better understand how body language impacts leadership effectiveness within the business environment, specifically in relation to how employees perceive leaders, build trust in them, and respond to their leadership style. Overall, the findings from the survey strongly support the literature reviewed throughout this study. The results suggest that body language is not simply an additional communication tool for leaders, but rather a major factor in how leaders build influence, establish credibility, and create effective relationships with their teams.

One of the strongest findings from the survey was the impact of consistency between a leader's verbal and non-verbal communication. Participants strongly agreed that when a leader's words and body language do not match, trust in that leader decreases (Q3), with this statement receiving one of the highest average scores in the survey ($M = 4.09$). Similarly, participants generally agree that when a leader's words contradict their body language, they are more likely to listen to the non-verbal cues (Q4, $M = 3.79$). This is consistent with Wojtaszek (2024), who argues that when verbal and non-verbal messages conflict, individuals tend to prioritize non-verbal cues, as these are perceived as the true reflections of a leader's genuine response. In the same manner, this aligns with Ladkin and Taylor's (2010) assertion that leadership is not only about internal authenticity but also about how the leader's "true self" is externally embodied and interpreted by followers. As a result, discrepancies between what is said and what is displayed non-verbally can reduce perceived credibility and reliability. Robertson (2020) also discussed how inconsistencies between what a leader says and what their body communicates can damage relationships that have already been built within a team. The survey results reinforce this idea, suggesting that in business environments, authenticity is critical. Employees appear to be highly aware of whether a leader's communication feels genuine, and when it does not, trust and effectiveness may begin to decline. The regression results for both Q3 & Q4 further strengthen this interpretation by showing that gender is a significant predictor of sensitivity to non-verbal inconsistency, with females reporting higher levels of agreement. This suggests that the interpretation of leadership communication is not uniform, but shaped by individual and social factors, reinforcing Louw and Barker's (2021) argument that followers actively construct the leadership relationship through perception and interpretation. In this sense, leadership effectiveness depends not only on what is communicated, but also on how it is perceived and

internally processed by different individuals within the follower group. This supports the relational nature of leadership proposed in the literature, where influence is co-created rather than unilaterally imposed.

Another major finding was related to facial expressions and emotional signaling. Participants strongly agreed that leaders who smile more frequently are perceived as more charismatic, trustworthy, and engaging ($M = 4.09$). This supports research from *The Leadership Quarterly* (Trichas & Schyns, 2012), which found that smiling leaders are often perceived as more charismatic and trustworthy, while more neutral or stressed expressions tend to lower perceptions of leadership effectiveness. One interesting finding was that business students rated this statement higher than the other professional groups. Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis test (TABLES 5 & 6) reveals that there are statistically significant differences between the 20–29 age group and the 30–39, 40–49, and 60+ age groups. The findings suggest that the 20–29 age group shows higher levels of agreement with the statement made by Q7. This may suggest that individuals with less professional experience place greater importance on visible warmth and emotional expression when evaluating leaders. It could also reflect a growing emphasis among younger professionals on emotional intelligence, approachability, and relationship-based leadership.

Eye contact was another area where the survey findings strongly aligned with the literature. Participants generally agreed that leaders who frequently look away or turn away during meetings are perceived as disinterested or dismissive ($M = 4.05$). This supports Robertson's (2020) and Carney's (2022) findings that lack of eye contact often communicates disengagement, disagreement, or lack of confidence. At the same time, there were some interesting differences between professional perspectives. Business students were more likely than managers or executives to associate intense eye contact with intimidation or coercive power. Additionally, as presented in Table 10, the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test show that business students have a statistically significant difference from the other professional groups in their interpretation of direct eye contact, with this group demonstrating a higher level of agreement with the statement compared to the rest of the sample. This connects with Schyns and Mohr's research on visual dominance, which suggests that eye contact can communicate authority and power (Schyns & Mohr, 2004). However, the survey results suggest that how these cues are interpreted may change with professional experience. More experienced professionals may view

strong eye contact as confidence and presence, while younger professionals may be more likely to interpret it as pressure or dominance.

The survey findings on posture and physical presence also support much of the existing literature. Participants generally agreed that leaders with upright and open posture appear more effective ($M = 3.77$), supporting Vazquez's research, which found that expansive body posture is associated with confidence, power, and leadership acceptance (Vazquez, 2014). In addition, participants also agreed that leaders who position themselves physically closer to employees appear more supportive ($M = 3.79$). This supports research on proxemics, which suggests that reduced physical distance can improve relationship quality, trust, and team performance. Interestingly, early-career professionals scored this statement lower than both students and experienced professionals. This may suggest that individuals who are still adjusting to workplace dynamics may place more importance on professional boundaries, while those with more or less experience may interpret physical closeness more positively.

In the demographic analysis, the results indicate that none of the survey items show statistically significant differences across cultural groups. This suggests that, within the context of this study and the sample analyzed, cultural background does not appear to influence participants' responses to the variables measured. However, this finding should be interpreted in relation to existing literature, which emphasizes that non-verbal communication and body language are often culturally dependent and can be interpreted differently across cultural norms and conventions. Therefore, although no significant differences were observed in this dataset, the result is constrained by the cultural composition of the sample. It remains possible that cultural groups not sufficiently represented in this study, particularly those with more distinct non-verbal communication systems, may demonstrate different patterns that are not reflected in the current findings.

One of the most important findings of the study came from Question 16, which asked whether a leader can still be effective if they have poor body language but excellent technical skills. Nearly 80% of respondents said no. This means that most participants did not believe technical ability alone is enough to make someone an effective leader. Instead, they believed that leadership also requires emotional connection, communication, and the ability to influence others through non-verbal presence. This strongly supports Robertson's argument that leadership is built on influence rather than authority (Robertson, 2020). Management may rely on formal

position, technical skill, or organizational knowledge, but leadership appears to depend much more on how a person connects with and inspires others. What makes this finding even stronger is that over 80% of managers and executives also agreed with this statement, suggesting that people with actual leadership experience recognize the importance of body language in leading others.

Another important finding was that 100% of participants believed that leadership body language should be situational rather than fixed. This means that regardless of age, experience level, or role, every respondent believed that effective leaders should adapt their non-verbal communication depending on the team or context. This strongly supports the literature on implicit leadership theories (Trichas & Schyns, 2012), which suggests that individuals have different expectations of what leadership should look like depending on context, culture, gender, or industry. The survey findings suggest that participants recognize there is no single “correct” leadership style, and that effective leadership requires adaptability.

Finally, participants were asked how much a leader’s non-verbal presence contributes to their overall influence. The majority of respondents believed that body language contributes to over 50% of a leader’s influence, with many placing it between 51% and 75%. This strongly supports both Mehrabian’s early work on communication (Robertson, 2020), as well as later research by Bellou & Gkorezis, who found that non-verbal communication makes up a large percentage of overall communication effectiveness (Bellou & Gkorezis, 2016). While the exact percentages in communication research may vary depending on context, the survey clearly shows that participants believe body language plays a major role in how leadership influence is created.

The findings of this research consistently support the literature and suggest that effective leadership in business is not only about technical knowledge, business strategy, or authority. It is also heavily influenced by how leaders present themselves through their body language. Facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, vocal delivery, physical presence, and communication consistency all shape how employees perceive leadership. These non-verbal cues influence trust, credibility, emotional connection, and employee willingness to follow, ultimately affecting both team effectiveness and organizational success.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to better understand the impact that body language has within the business environment, specifically how a leader's non-verbal communication influences employee trust, engagement, and overall leadership effectiveness. Through both the literature review and the survey findings, it became clear that body language plays a much greater role in leadership than simply supporting verbal communication. The research consistently showed that employees and future business professionals pay close attention to non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, vocal delivery, and physical presence when evaluating a leader. These cues influence whether a leader is perceived as trustworthy, confident, approachable, and competent, all of which directly affect how willing employees are to engage, communicate openly, and follow leadership direction. The findings also showed that inconsistencies between what a leader says and what their body language communicates can quickly reduce trust, while positive and congruent non-verbal behaviors strengthen relationships and create stronger team connections. Additionally, the differences found between professional groups suggest that while perceptions of specific non-verbal cues may evolve with workplace experience, the importance of body language itself remains consistent across all levels of business experience. This research suggests that effective leadership is not defined only by technical knowledge, authority, or business results, but also by a leader's ability to communicate confidence, authenticity, empathy, and presence through their non-verbal behavior. In increasingly collaborative and people-driven business environments, body language is not just an accessory to leadership, but a key part of how leadership is experienced and how employee trust and engagement are built.

These findings are important not only for understanding the role of non-verbal communication in leadership, but also for their practical application within organizations. The results suggest that non-verbal communication should be viewed as a skill that can be developed rather than an innate leadership trait. Therefore, organizations should consider incorporating non-verbal communication training into leadership development initiatives. Companies may also benefit from adopting experiential learning approaches, such as role-playing, improvisation, and other embodied learning activities, which allow leaders to practice and receive feedback on their communication behaviors in realistic situations. By taking these steps, organizations can help

leaders communicate more effectively, strengthen trust and engagement within teams, and ultimately improve overall leadership effectiveness.

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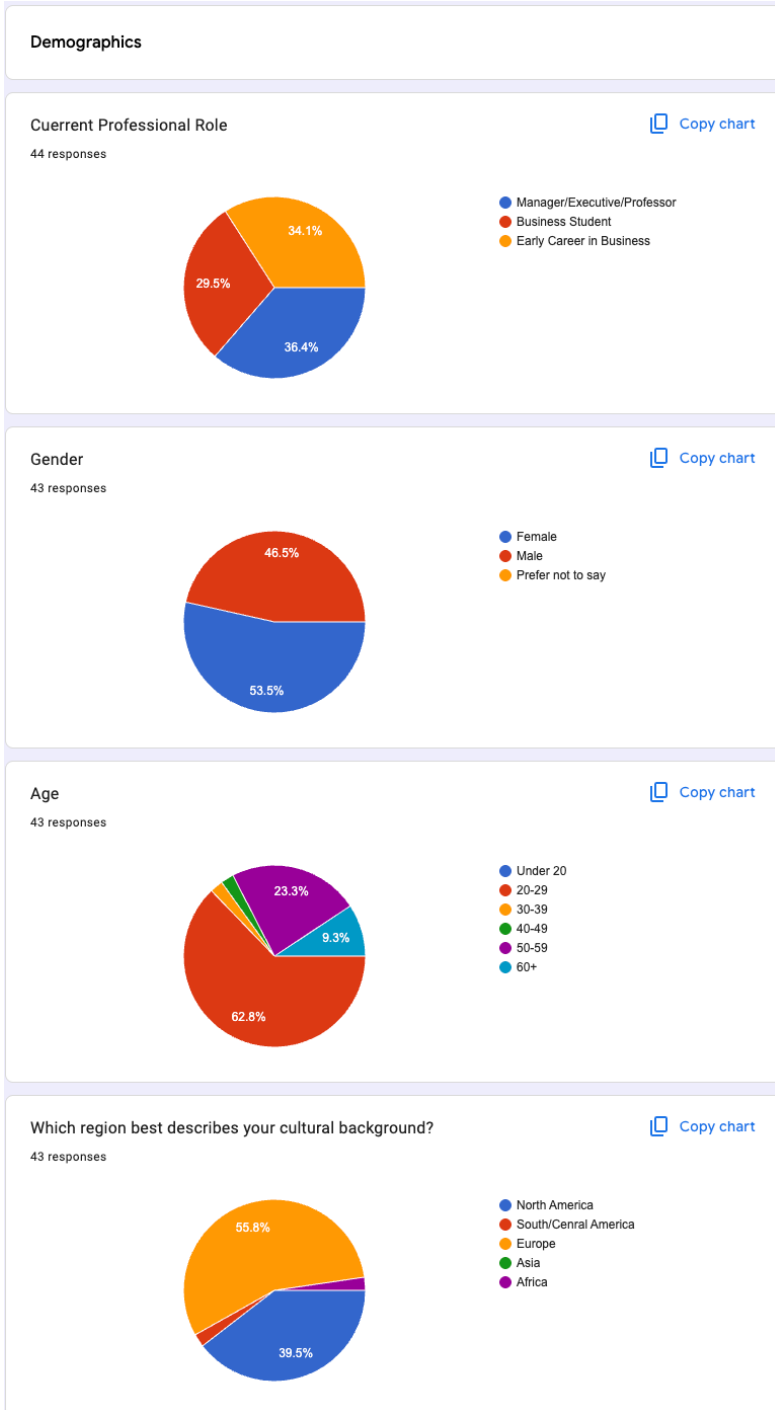
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APPENDIX

Survey

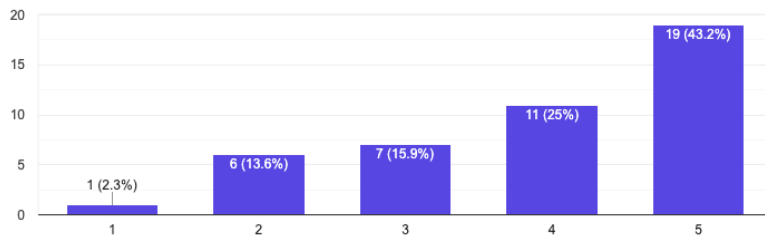


Questions

A leader's nonverbal language is just as important as their technical business knowledge for team effectiveness

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44 responses

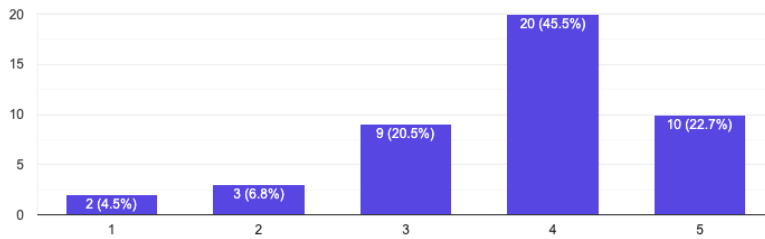


Q1

My "ideal image" of a leader includes specific nonverbal traits (e.g., a certain way of walking or sitting).

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44 responses

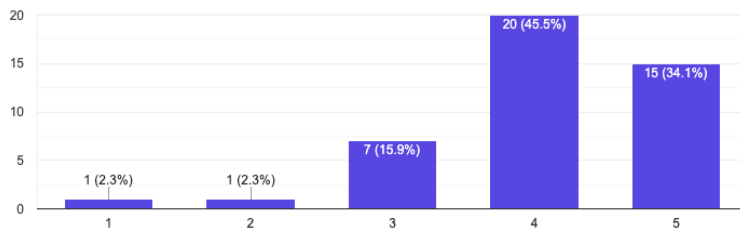


Q2

Inconsistency between a leader's verbal message and their nonverbal cues causes me to lose trust in their leadership.

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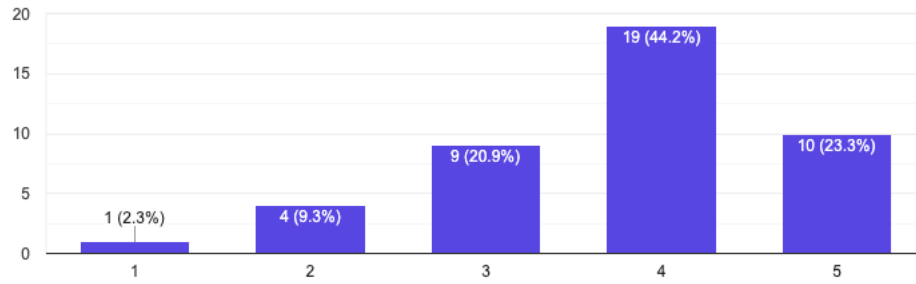
44 responses



Q3

When a leader's words contradict their body language, I am more likely to believe their body language [Copy chart](#)

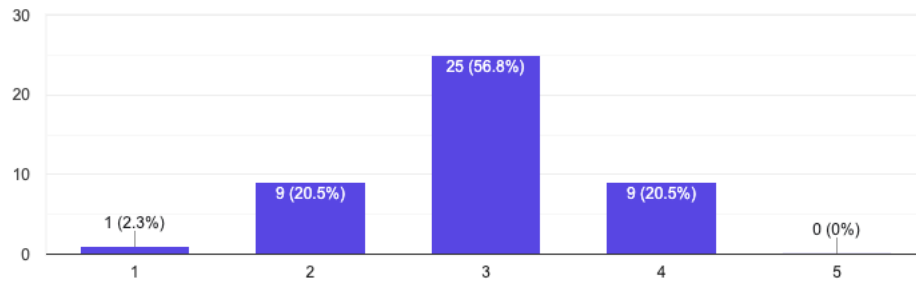
43 responses



Q4

A leader who lowers their eyebrows while speaking is perceived as more dominant. [Copy chart](#)

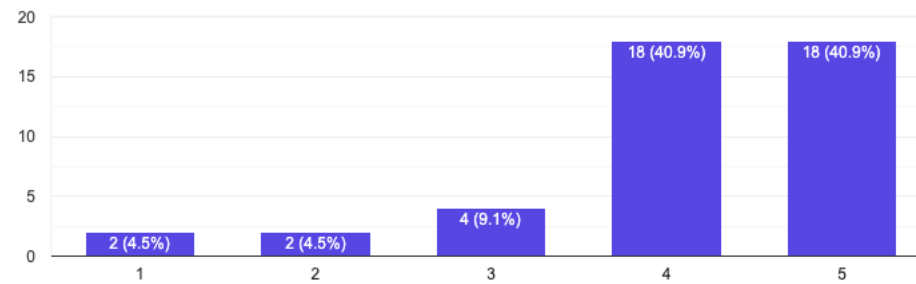
44 responses



Q5

Frequent smiling by a leader significantly increases their perceived charisma and trustworthiness. [Copy chart](#)

44 responses

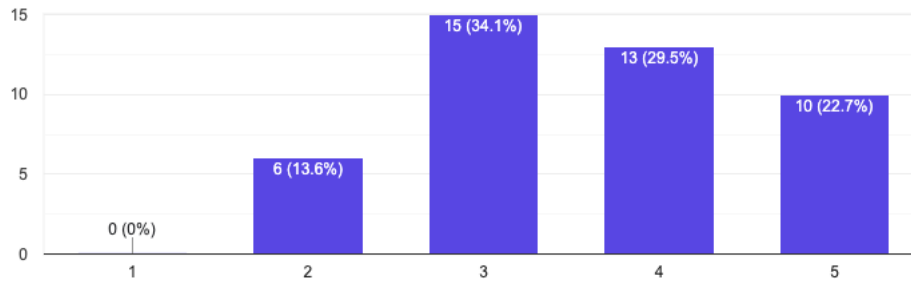


Q6

A leader appears less determined or attractive if they look "stressed" (e.g., raised/pulled eyebrows).

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44 responses

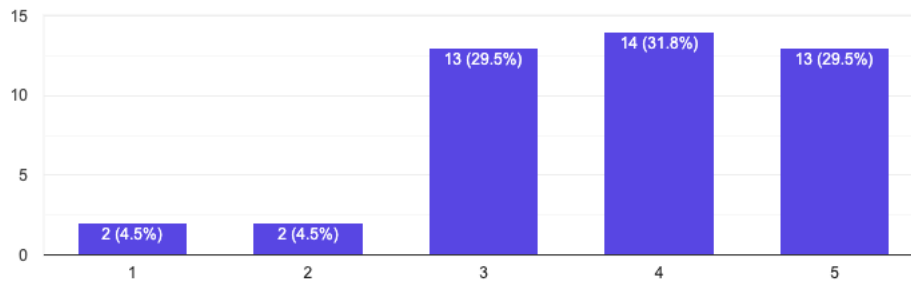


Q7

An erect and positive body posture is essential for a leader to be seen as effective.

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44 responses

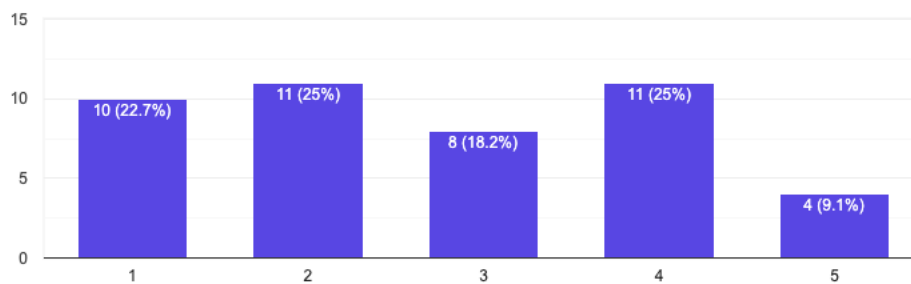


Q8

Constant, direct eye contact from a leader feels like an exercise of "coercive power" or intimidation.

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44 responses

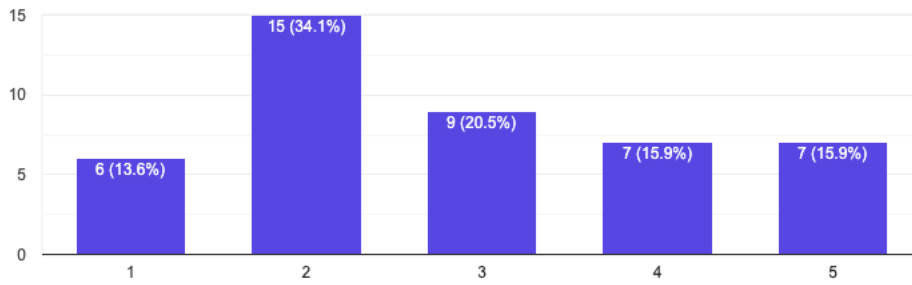


Q9

I perceive a leader as more "influential" if they maintain eye contact while speaking but look away more while listening.

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44 responses

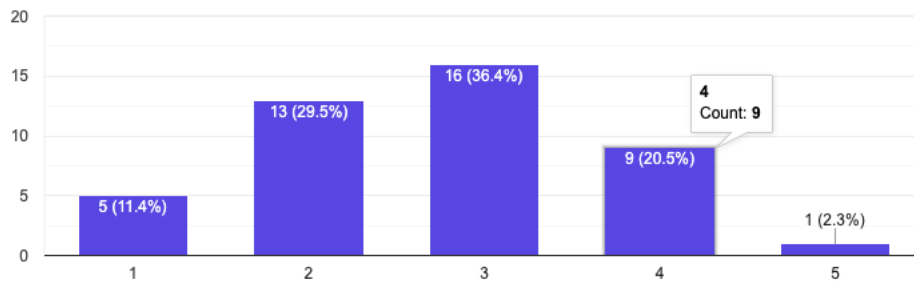


Q10

In a business setting, a neutral facial expression makes a leader seem less trustworthy.

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44 responses

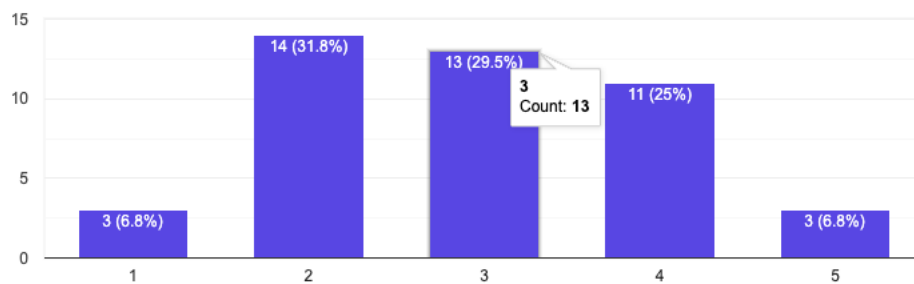


Q11

A leader who leans backward during a conversation is perceived as exercising power rather than showing respect.

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44 responses

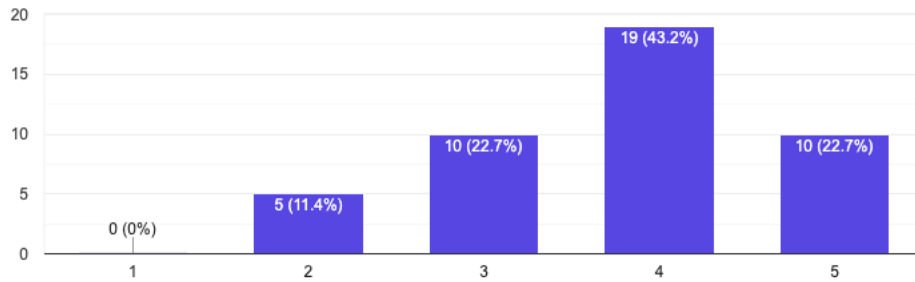


Q12

A leader who stands closer to their subordinates is perceived as being more supportive.

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44 responses

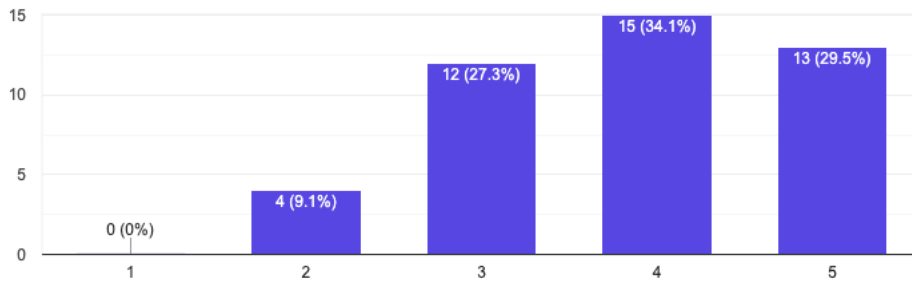


Q13

Specific behaviors like nodding and "sympathetic smiling" are the primary ways I identify a supportive leader.

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44 responses

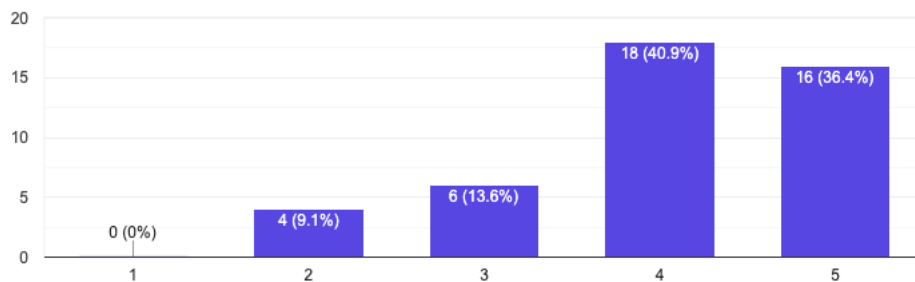


Q14

A leader who frequently looks away or turns away during a meeting is perceived as disinterested or dismissive.

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44 responses



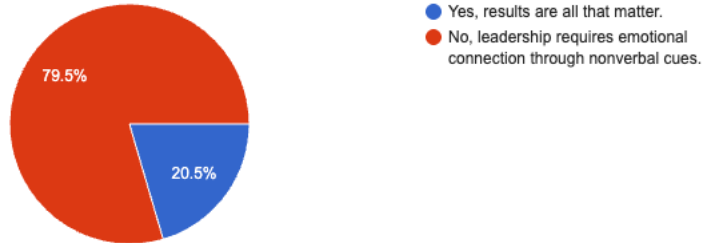
Q15

A/B Question:

In your view, can a leader be "effective" if they have poor body language but excellent technical skills?

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44 responses

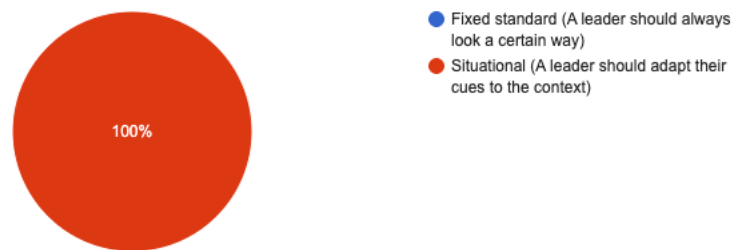


Q16

Do you believe there is a "standard" body language for a leader, or should it change based on the team?

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44 responses

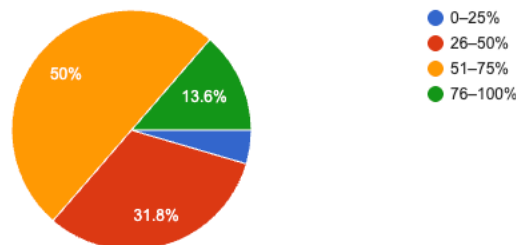


Q17

In your opinion, how much does a leader's nonverbal presence contribute to their "Influence" over others?

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44 responses



Q18

Open ended questions:

(Open-ended) Describe one specific nonverbal habit you have observed in a leader that made them appear "Ineffective."

32 responses

In a technical field, it's common for lack of emotional intelligence/nonverbal cues to stunt the most technically savvy engineers. Inability to confidently articulate ideas (eye contact, upright posture, confident tone) often undermine really great ideas from taking root. It's not just having the idea that counts. If people have a hard time watching you present it, no one will fall in line. Confidence is an aspect but having the social skills to pull people in is important as well.

sitting far back in their chair

Inattentiveness, they seemed pre-occupied by other things while having a conversation.

Lack of eye contact

Not listening to feedback from subordinates and always stay far from the team (needs to at least come and see them during the day)

poor eye contact

Looking at other papers in his/her desk or at his mobile, writing reminders for later tasks, showing stress

(For Students and in early career): What is the #1 nonverbal trait you expect to see in a "Great Leader"?

24 responses

Social intelligence (eye contact, nodding, active listening, nonverbal support and connection to team)

eye contact

Eye-contact

Active listening and physical proximity when walking or seating in meetings.

A good smile

A smile

Calm movements

Confident look

Declaration on the Use of AI and Statistical Tools

In accordance with academic integrity guidelines regarding disclosure, this statement outlines the deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) systems and analytical software during the preparation of this Capstone Project.

AI-driven applications were utilized strictly in a supportive capacity to enhance grammar, language fluency, and the overall clarity of the written text. Their role was restricted to refining vocabulary choices and ensuring grammatical correctness across the manuscript. Additionally, SPSS software was employed to facilitate the processing and execution of the statistical analysis.

The core components of this research, including but not limiting: the study design, literature review, data interpretation, discussion, and final conclusions, were developed, carried out, and finalized solely by the researcher. The incorporation of these digital tools did not substitute for the critical reasoning, empirical evaluations, or scholarly judgments essential to this study.