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THE CREDIBILITY CODE

SEVEN COMMON CREDIBILITY BLIND SPOTS AND HOW THEY CAN DERAIL YOUR IMAGE

Beware your credibility blind spots, says Cara Hale Alter, author of *The Credibility Code: How to Project Confidence and Competence When It Matters Most* (Meritus, 2012). These image derailers can be irritating and distracting to everyone ... but you.

In face-to-face interactions, whether in-person or virtual, your blind spots undermine your image, warns Alter. The good news is that once you identify these behaviors, you can take steps to eliminate them.

The surest way to uncover your credibility blind spots, advises Alter, is to capture yourself on video in a typical business setting. While there are numerous behaviors to look for, she says, seven blind spots are most common:

1. Using speech fillers. Speech fillers are superfluous sounds or words, like "um" and "you know." Today, such fillers are pervasive in our culture, including the business world. A smart, young technology CEO recently said to his team, "So, I actually sort of passionately believe that we have an opportunity to, uh, you know, sort of really take this platform to a new level. So we just kind of, uh, need to jump in, you know, with full force." He wanted to fire up his people, but his fillers extinguished his passion.

Fast Tip: Embrace the tactical pause. Instead of interjecting fillers, simply pause while your mind searches for the next word.

2. Making extraneous movements. Extraneous movements—such as jiggling your knee, bobbing your head, or shifting your weight—weaken your personal power. You might say, "I can't help myself. I just can't be still." Truth is, excessive fidgeting is a self-comforting behavior. Stillness sends a message that you're calm and confident.

Fast Tip: Test your ability to literally have a level head. Fold a thick pair of socks and balance it on your head. Try talking for several minutes without losing the socks.

3. Self-commenting. When you feel self-conscious, it's easy to overreact to your every mistake. If you trip over a word, you might apologize ("Sorry!"), make a joke ("No more coffee for me"), or resort to nonverbal reflexes, like shaking your head or shrugging your shoulders. The problem with this "self-commenting" is your external preoccupation with your internal criticism. Mistakes happen; simply correct them and move on.

Fast Tip: Fictionary is a game where players compose fake definitions of obscure words. Play it with your friends or family as a fun way to learn to ignore your inner critic.

4. Misplacing upward vocal inflections. You probably work with someone who speaks in "up talk": using upward inflections that sound like question marks at the end of sentences. This vocal pattern is widespread—and contagious. Be vigilant in not picking it up.

“If you want to be a powerful voice, speak with a powerful voice.”



About Cara:

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In addition to being the author of *The Credibility Code*, Cara Hale Alter is the founder and president of Speech Skills LLC, an award-winning San Francisco-based communication training company. With more than 20 years of experience, Cara has become the go-to expert for training individuals in the art and science of projecting confidence and competence when it matters most: in face-to-face interactions.

3. Speak with optimal volume. If you're a *Seinfeld* fan, you surely remember the infamous "low talker." Likewise, in business settings a common problem with volume is speaking too softly or dropping volume at the end of sentences. The good news is that volume is the easiest vocal skill to adjust. First, however, you must know the difference between adequate volume and optimal volume. Most people err on the side of merely adequate. If you want to be a powerful voice, speak with a powerful voice.

Practice Tip: Your diaphragm, the small muscle separating your chest and abdominal cavity, is your engine for volume. Strengthen this muscle with five minutes of isolated exercises a day. One such exercise: Say the days of the week in a single breath, drawing out the vowels to prevent your diaphragm from resting between words. Later, move on to the months of the year.

4. Hold eye contact for three to five seconds. "Eye contact is the best accessory," says writer Takayuki Ikkaku. It is also a key indicator of confidence and credibility. Still, there is a difference between making eye contact and holding eye contact. Duration is critical, and in the Western world, holding eye contact for three to five seconds is considered optimal.

Practice Tip: As you converse with coworkers, try speaking one phrase to one person. Then, when you reach a natural pause, speak the next phrase to someone else. Continue in this way, letting the structure of your sentences guide your rhythm. You may look away momentarily, but keep your eyes on the horizon—no looking up or down—and each time you come back, hold eye contact for three to five seconds.

5. Listen actively. Your credibility can be won or lost when you're simply listening. Do you look bored or disconnected—or respectfully engaged? Attentive listening means

you're an active partner. It's not enough to pay attention; you have to look like you're paying attention. Keep your posture open, your head up, and your navel pointing toward the speaker.

Practice Tip: At your next meeting, imagine that a coworker is taking notes about your behavior. What cues are you displaying? Are you following the conversation with your eyes and nose aimed at the speaker? Is your body language open and energized? And are you reacting to others with non-verbal signals that say you're listening? ■

“Business moves at lightning speed, and people make their minds up about you in seconds. Your credentials may get you in the door, but you still have to embody your credibility in the moment.”

“The problem with “self-commenting” is your external preoccupation with your internal criticism.”

Fast Tip: Read an article aloud with strong downward inflections. Begin each sentence at middle to high pitch and cascade downward at the end of each phrase.

5. Making yourself smaller. If you're like most people, when you feel intimidated, you make yourself smaller to avoid being an easy target. You might place your feet closer together, tuck your arms to your sides, dip your chin, or pull back on your volume. Any or all of these behaviors say, “I feel threatened.”

Fast Tip: Practice optimal standing posture throughout the day, not just in important situations, to help make it habitual. Balance your weight over your feet, lengthen your spine, and elongate your neck.

6. Masking your face and hands. Masking behaviors can creep up when you feel uneasy or on the spot. This takes many different forms, including crossing your arms, clasping your hands, playing with your clothes or jewelry, or having a poker face—cutting off any animation of your face or hands.

Fast Tip: The more comfortable you feel, the more animated you are with your face and hands. Open your posture and engage your gestures at the start of each conversation. Practice this at company gatherings or networking events, where you have the opportunity to talk to a lot of people in a short period of time.

7. Dropping eye contact. You don't see professional athletes dropping their eyes to the ground during play. In business settings, when you drop eye contact, you drop out of the game. Keep your eyes on the horizon and give your listeners the same respect you expect from them—your full attention. It's all right to move your eyes to the side momentarily to gather your thoughts. Otherwise, if your mouth is moving, your eyes should be on your listeners.

Fast Tip: Train yourself to keep your eyes up while thinking and talking. One practice exercise: Place blank Post-it notes across a large wall in your home or office. Ask yourself questions and hold your eyes on a Post-it while answering. Let your sentence structure be your cue to move from Post-it to Post-it. ■



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