

A LINE ON LIFE

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Communicating Your Status *

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Your **social status** is your rank or standing related to other people in a particular social setting. The higher your social status is in a group, the more likely that others will submit to your wishes. The lower your social status is, the more likely you will give in to the wishes of others. To get others to do what you want, how can you increase your social status in a group?

In some cases, social status is pre-established by your occupation, title, or position of authority. For example, parents, judges, teachers and doctors have higher status respectively than children, defendants, students and patients. The last four categories are more likely to do what the first four positions ask, rather than the other way around. Also, because I have the title "*Doctor*" rather than "*Mister*," it is more likely that you will go along with my recommendations.

But what if these titles or positions were unknown? How does status information get transmitted in a new, informal situation like a party? Typically, we disclose our status without even being aware of it. Likewise, we unconsciously respond to **nonverbal communication** patterns of others to determine their relative status. In turn, this determines whether we will expect them to give in to our wishes or we feel a need to submit to their desires.

Status transactions are forms of communication between people that establish their relative status, their social power, and their territorial control. In any new encounter, you can have fun watching these moment-by-moment adjustments to establish status, especially when the status differences are small. However, it is less fun when *you* are engaged in these status transactions. How can you change your nonverbal communication to indicate high social status?

A **high status impression** is made when you convey a nonverbal message of certainty, self-control and authority. To do this, here are some suggestions —



- move slowly, smoothly and purposefully
- keep your posture erect and stable
- make eye contact and coordinate it with what you are saying, not letting your eyes shift about
- hold your head still when speaking (except when you are using it to emphasize verbal responses, like shaking it for "yes" and "no" answers)
- keep your speech rate even and measured and make sure your sentences are complete
- occupy more space by spreading out your arms and legs.

On the other hand, you create a **low status impression** when you convey a sense of insecurity, of not being worth anyone's attention, of willingness to be submissive. Since I am assuming that you do not want to create the image of being low status, avoid doing the following. In other words, do **NOT** —



- fidget, fuss, or move jerkily
- repeatedly touch your face or hair

- shift position and eye contact frequently
- hang on to objects in the room
- stand with your toes *"pointed in"* or occupy a restricted, small space
- smile with your teeth covering your bottom lip
- speak breathlessly with a hesitant little *"er"* before each sentence
- repeatedly giggle or laugh after your statements
- overqualify each statement you make with phrases like *"at least it seems that way to me"* or *"but I could be wrong."*

These behavioral differences create an impression of your status, which determines how you are evaluated by others. For example, people that make a high status impression are seen as more competent and intelligent. In turn, what they say gets listened to and is more likely to have a greater impact. In 1981, a psychological study had a person role-playing a juror in a lawsuit. This juror argued for an extremely deviant position on how much money should be awarded. Subjects watched a videotape in which the juror gave his arguments. In one tape, his behavioral style was high status. On another, it was low status. As might be expected — even though the arguments were identical on both videotapes — the juror was more influential in changing the monetary judgments of the subjects when he used high status behavior. Even when the juror was described as having a high-status occupation, he was influential *only* if he displayed high status behaviors!

Whether you are confident of your abilities or not — you can create an impression of confidence and status by the way you act. You can start by playing status transaction games with your friends. Without telling them, merely do some of the high- or low-status behaviors indicated above. Notice how these changes influence their behavior. Also notice how their responses affect your own subsequent behavior and your feelings about yourself. Once you find out which behaviors can be most easily changed to communicate high status, practice them. Then use them when dealing with others.

* Adapted from Philip Zimbardo's *Psychology and Life*, Scott, Foresman & Company, 1985, pages 574-575.