

# "Are You Mad at Me?"

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That surprising question packed a powerful lesson.

A colleague I had worked with over the years came up to me in the hallway and asked if we could talk in a conference room. Sure, I said, wondering what was up. We sat down, and the question came out of the blue: “Are you mad at me?” Of course not, I responded immediately, since I had to no reason to be.

I was puzzled, but I realized later what was going on. As an editor, I faced a lot of tight deadlines, and I would often have just a short window to get a story into shape for the next day’s paper. I’m guessing I was thinking hard about some story as I walked through the newsroom one day -- probably furrowing my brow, my mind a million miles away -- when I briefly locked eyes with my colleague, who was startled enough by my body language to later pull me into a conference room to wonder if the air needed to be cleared between us.

That colleague did me a huge favor, because I learned a memorable lesson that day about how people can read so much into subtle, and often unintended, cues. From that moment on, I found myself making much more of an effort to be aware of my body language, particularly with the team of reporters I was leading, and to always show energy, confidence and optimism, even if I was on a tight deadline and wrestling with a difficult problem.

Many CEOs have told me similar stories about moments when they realized how much they were, in effect, constantly under the bright lights of a stage, intensely scrutinized by employees who often pay more attention to the non-verbal cues than what their leaders are saying. Do they look concerned? Is something up?

The leader who best crystallized this notion for me was Linda Hudson, the president of BAE Systems. I’ll let her tell the story, which comes from [my interview](#) with her a few years ago. I had asked her about important leadership lessons she had learned. Here was one of them:

“It was when I first became a company president, and it was the first job where I was truly responsible for the performance of a company. I had mastered the day-to-day mechanics of running organizations. But I don’t think the leadership part of it had settled in quite as profoundly as it did when I took over a company.

“I was the first female president of the General Dynamics Corporation, and I went out and bought my new fancy suits to wear to work and so on. And I’m at work on my very first day, and a lady at Nordstrom’s had showed me how to tie a scarf in a very unusual kind of way for my new suit. And I go to work and wear my suit, and I have my first day at work. And then I come back to work the next day, and I run into no fewer than a dozen women in the organization who have on scarves tied exactly like mine.

“And that’s when I realized that life was never going to be the way it had been before, that people were watching everything I did. And it wasn’t just going to be about how I dressed. It was about my behavior, the example I set, the tone I set, the way I carried myself, how confident I was — all those kinds of things. It really was now about me and the context of setting the tone for the organization.

“That was a lesson I have never forgotten — that as a leader, people are looking at you in a way that you could not have imagined in other roles. And I didn’t see that nearly as profoundly when I was leading a functional organization or a smaller enterprise. But to this day, not only the awareness of that, but the responsibility that goes along with it, is something that I think about virtually every day.”

It’s a challenge that every leader faces. Here’s a smart tip that Jeffrey Swartz, the former CEO of Timberland, told me he learned from his father:

“I remember him saying, ‘Pick a face. If you want to be serious, then you have to be serious all the time. Because if you’re serious one day and happy the next, people will be confused. They won’t be able to figure out where you’re coming from and that’ll be threatening.’”

Pick a face. Ever since that colleague asked me the surprising question about whether I was angry, I’ve tried to pick a face – no more furrowed brows – and be consistent. If leaders are consistent, then their employees can spend more time focusing on their work, and less time searching for clues in the boss’s body language.

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