How to Put Formal Body Language at Ease

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I'm sure you've heard it said that when you leave the military it's critical to lose some of the body language and gestures you've been taught. For instance, the civilian sector, doesn't salute individuals of higher stature or pay grade. We also don't stand at attention when waiting for instruction. Losing some of the formal body language from the military might be challenging at first, but over time, it will feel more natural.

The Handshake

When civilians greet each other, a handshake is a natural and professional gesture to show we are receptive to the person we are meeting. Most people also shake hands with their right hand, so be sure to keep it available when you're in a group of people, heading into an interview, or otherwise could be introducing yourself.

A strong handshake shows confidence and self-assuredness. On the other hand, a "bone crushing" handshake is off-putting. The goal of a handshake is to show interest and greeting, not to assert your strength, power or aggression.

When meeting someone, practice extending your right hand forward for them to receive. Then, clasp their hand, pump up and down one or two times (women tend to do this longer than men), and retreat your hand. Holding the grip for too long feels awkward.

Also, avoid the "dead fish" handshake where you offer a limp, unresponsive hand. It can signal a lack of confidence and is distasteful and uncomfortable for the recipient. Trust me.

Eye Contact

They say eyes are "the windows to the soul," and are often the first part of someone we see when we greet them. For this reason, establishing and maintaining strong eye contact is critical.

Good eye contact means you look at the person when you are talking to them, and when they respond. It is perfectly fine to look down at your notes from time to time in order to

break eye contact if you feel you might be staring.

Bad eye contact is not looking directly at the person you are speaking to. Some people will do this if the conversation is heated, serious or sensitive. For instance, if you are in a job interview and are being asked tough questions, you might be tempted to look down or off to the side for a long time. The challenge is that if you avoid eye contact it can quickly send the message that you are unsure, defensive or insecure. This is particularly important to avoid in a job interview or at work.

Sitting and Standing

Have you ever been told you stand "at attention" when talking to co-workers? In the military, how you sit and stand is directly correlated to the rank of the person or people you are with, or the setting of the meeting. In the civilian sector, the protocols around sitting and standing are less formal.

When sitting, you should be comfortable and relaxed, but still professional. Feet should be on the floor (never showing the underside of your shoes,) or legs crossed (women). Men typically widen the space between their knees when sitting; women should never do this. A good rule of thumb is to watch how the other person is sitting. In a job interview, for instance, if the hiring manager is leaning forward a bit, feel free to do the same. If the interviewer is leaning back, then a relaxed posture is perfectly appropriate.

Standing is also important. When standing at a networking event, job fair, or in line for coffee, civilians tend to hold themselves out to be approachable with their posture. Shoulders are relaxed, eyes confidently make contact, and hands should be accessible to shake with another person, or exchange business cards.

Body language is more than the salute, handshake, or posture when standing. How you communicate non-verbally through your tone, message, and physical presence lets others know if you are approachable, interesting or standoffish.

Developed through the VFW's collaboration with Lida Citroën of the international brand strategy firm LIDA360, this article is part of the VFW's expanding education and transitioning services, resources and webinars designed to provide service members and veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce with an opportunity to learn about personal branding and strategies for navigating the job search process. To learn more about Lida's commitment to the veteran community, check out her recent TEDX talk.

Join us for our free webinar with Lida on Feb. 6, 2018, at 2 p.m. CST. Register today.

By Lida Citroën, CEO, LIDA360