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THE HOME ECONOMIST: Strike a pose to strike a deal

Behavioral researchers say they've found mimicking power postures actually stimulate chemical changes in our bodies.

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Standing up straight has long been at least one key to success in modeling, the military and even childhood. As our mothers have always told us, stop slouching – because they said so.

Now scientists are backing them up, giving those of us aiming for high-paid leadership roles in any occupation a few good reasons why. Researchers say they have actual proof that good posture and other **power poses** will stimulate a chemical change inside our bodies that can make us better leaders. And those skills, say experts, are so highly valued in the workplace that they often equate to more money.

“We can definitely say you should prepare for stressful leadership challenges by posing in high **power** positions for a few minutes,” says Amy Cuddy, an associate professor at Harvard Business School. To test her theories, she put subjects in either high **power** or low influence **poses** and measured their chemical structures, risk tolerances and self-images. “Instead of sitting in a waiting room, huddled over your phone and reading, you should be making yourself big.”

It seems that ever since communications consultants have appeared on the front lines of executive training, they've been saying our body language can make or break our careers. But this research from Harvard is the first to show that expansive and open positions can actually have a positive physiological affect, readjusting our hormone levels so they're in tune with the body chemistry of the most effective leaders.

“It's not like people are posing and someone is giving them subconscious feedback because they look powerful,” Cuddy says. “It doesn't require social interaction. Within two minutes of holding these **poses**, you're experiencing hormonal and behavioral changes.”

Here's how it works.

First strike a **power** pose, such as the classic CEO stance, which has your feet on your desk and your hands clasped behind your head, elbows open. Or — at the risk of introducing yet another workplace hurdle to women — sit with your legs open and your arm resting on the back of the chair next to you. Then there's an open stand, which calls for hands on hips, chest out, shoulders squared and feet spread. And those are just the publicly acceptable ideas. If you're alone in the bathroom, feel free to stretch out your arms and legs out like a human star and achieve the same hormonal adjustment. Hold your chosen pose for about two minutes and then, some 15 minutes later, your level of testosterone (the dominance hormone) will increase by about 19 percent, while your level of cortisol (the stress hormone) will decrease by about 25 percent, Cuddy says.

What's more, you'll feel more powerful and have a greater risk-taking tolerance. Essentially, you've created internally a more ideal physical condition for leadership.

“We used to think leadership was based on the testosterone,” she says. “It makes people feel dominant

and more aggressive. But imagine a high testosterone or a high cortisol leader – that’s a stressed out leader who’s vigilant and paranoid. Leaders have to deal with stressful situations” — thus the need for reduced cortisol.

It’s true, says Marian Morgan, a Miami executive coach. In order to effectively guide people, you have to be confident and able to weather unexpected challenges, without growing hostile or aggressive, she says. “People who come across as realistic and measured make the best leaders,” she says.

The direct effects of standing up straight make enough sense to physical therapy experts that they question only why we haven’t been discussing it for years. Because it’s long established that physically forcing yourself to smile will release hormones to make you happier, says Cynthia Gonzalez, a doctor of physical therapy and athletic trainer at Orthopedic Rehabilitation Specialists in Kendall. And we can say for certain that regular exercise releases endorphins while yoga **poses** can help you relax.

“Our minds and body are connected,” says Gonzalez.

What’s more, there’s evidence that taking up physical space equates to **power** and dominance, says Michelle Villalobos, a corporate trainer in Miami who conducts a seminar called Strut . That’s why a staggering number of CEOs are tall and, not incidentally, why the five-foot, one-inch Villalobos wears towering heels and a toppling hairstyle, she says.

“When you cower what you’re saying is, ‘I’m not a force to be reckoned with,’” she says. So as long as you’ve got the pose, the chemistry – and presumably a healthy grasp on how your industry works – you have a good chance of making more money, says Steve Chandler, a Gilbert, Ariz.-based leadership coach and the author of “Reinventing Yourself.”

“We have so many people addicted to being approved of and pleasing people that leadership is in rare supply,” he says. “We have so few [leaders] that they’re valued very highly and when they’re in the corporate world, it translates into better performance.”

So even if on the inside you’re feeling timid, it’s likely a new pose could change your mind. “It might feel like you’re faking,” Chandler says, “but after doing it enough times, it’s no longer faking. It’s the real you. It’s the new you.”

*This is a monthly column by Miamian **Brett Graff**, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people .*