



LEADERSHIP

What Sheryl Sandberg's and Jack Dorsey's Capitol Hill testimony can teach anyone about reacting under pressure

Zameena Meja | 10:36 AM ET Thu, 6 Sept 2018



Jim Watson | AFP | Getty Images

CEO of Twitter Jack Dorsey (R) and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg (L) are sworn in to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee on September 5, 2018.



On Wednesday, [Facebook](#) COO [Sheryl Sandberg](#) and [Twitter](#) CEO [Jack Dorsey](#) testified before [Congress](#). The two tech leaders were subjected to hours of questioning before the Senate Intelligence Committee regarding

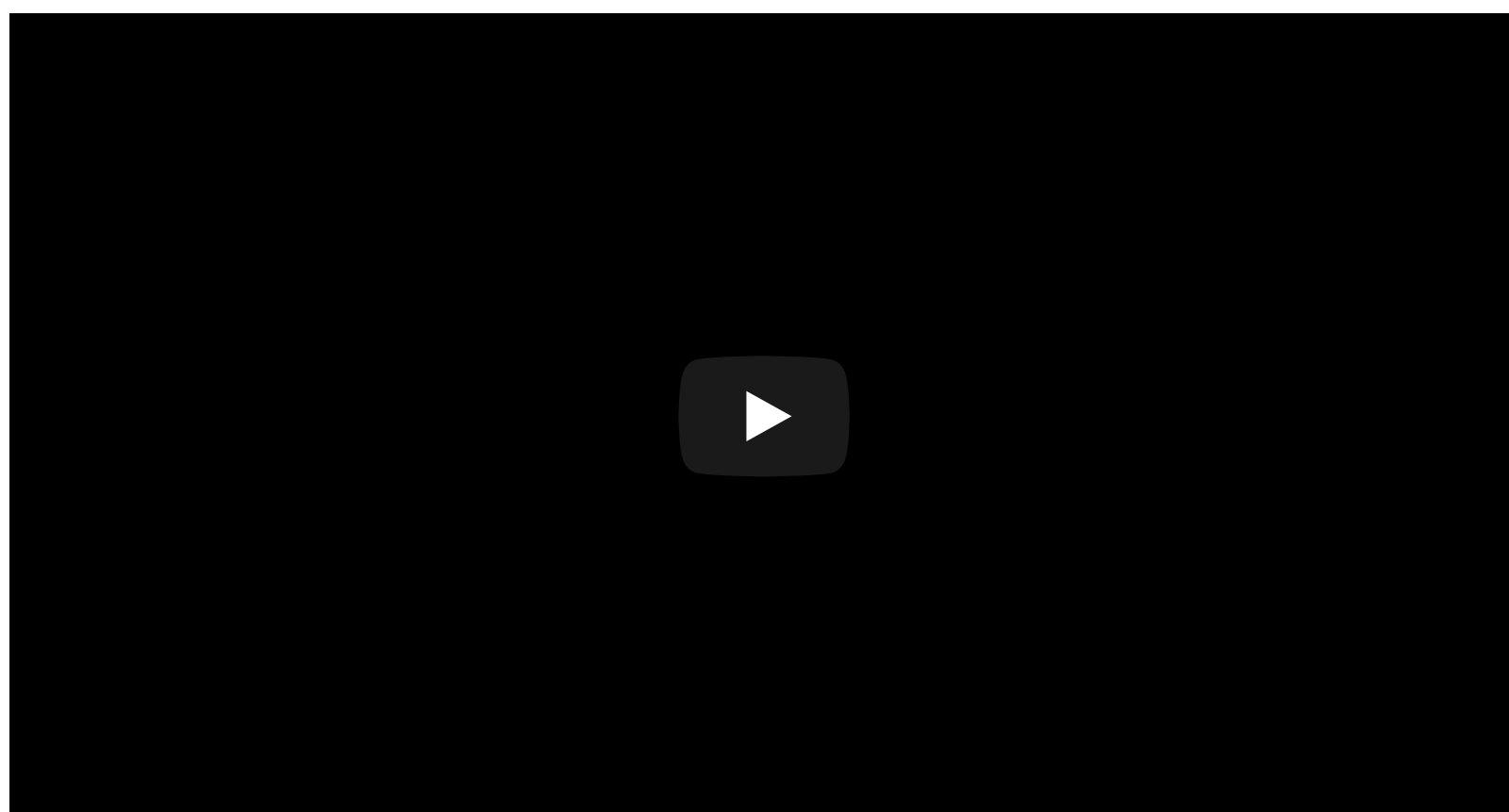
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voter manipulation, propaganda and even efforts to incite violence on their platforms.

The two leaders needed to craft answers to controversial and technical topics while reassuring congresspeople and consumers that the platforms were doing all they could protect users. Their two performances were a stark reminder of how differently leaders communicate and how gestures and expressions can shape the messages they send.

[CNBC Make It](#) spoke to five communication and body language experts who analyzed Sandberg's and Dorsey's responses, sharing tips on how all leaders can ensure they present themselves in the best way possible, even in challenging and pressure-packed moments.



Do speak with control

Both Dorsey and Sandberg remained calm and controlled throughout their testimony, speaking deliberately and clearly.

"In a high pressure situation, it's your responsibility to have control over your emotions, what you're going to say, how you're going to respond, either verbally or nonverbally," says [Blanca Cobb](#), a body language expert.

Although Dorsey and Sandberg could have internalized the questions Senate members asked them and become upset, Cobb says that by being emotionally intelligent, they instead came across as respectful and not defensive.

"By being emotionally intelligent, you are planning at a subconscious level and you're setting the stage," she says. Preparation can help give you this confidence and control and help you focus on the message you want to convey.



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Don't be too controlled

Dorsey moved little throughout most of the hearing. The Twitter CEO kept his hands in one spot on the table or clasped them tightly together. This made Dorsey appear nervous at times or at least overly cautious when compared to the relaxed Sandberg at the other end of the room, according to our experts, who also point out that he seemed to speak in a monotone, almost machine-like way.

"Think about when we're talking in conversation: there's movement, you're expressing yourself," says [Mary Civiello](#), an executive communications coach. Stiffness can seem unnatural and possibly introduce doubt in your audience's mind — important for any leader to consider. "If you're sitting there very stiff, it looks uncomfortable and it prompts the questions, 'Are you telling us everything? Are you someone we can trust?'"

Don't let high stakes get to you

In the hearing, Florida Senator Marco Rubio asked Sandberg and Dorsey about how their respective companies operate in foreign countries including Turkey, China and Vietnam and if they turn information over to foreign governments when requested. In the hearing, Sandberg, changed subtly in this moment, according to our experts, and could even seem slightly agitated.

"She tossed her head back, she narrowed her eyes and she jutted her chin out slightly," says [Civiello](#). At the end of her response Sandberg pressed her lips together, notes Patryk Wezowski, co-founder of the [Center for Body Language](#). While there's no way to know what Sandberg was thinking in this moment, Wezowski says such a move can be a natural sign of controlled irritation.

If you find yourself in a high-pressure moment, pay extra attention to your nonverbal communication, says [Cobb](#). Just be aware of your emotions and how they can impact your body language. Act as naturally as possible. Try not to freeze and relax your face.

Don't forget nervous ticks

Dorsey's closed, clasped hand hold could indicate the need to self-comfort in some people, says [executive coach Patti Wood](#). The self-hand hold is a natural response in a pressure-packed situation, but still one leaders should avoid.

In high-stakes moments, check in with yourself. Tell yourself to relax. Let your hands relax with you, ensuring they are unclenched or unclasped. Don't forget to add fluctuation to your voice and pull your shoulders from your ears.

Consider practicing high-pressure discussions in front of someone you trust. This process can help you catch gestures you might not even be aware you're making. "I coach business owners, C-suite executives and I have coached clients to testify before Congress," Wood says. "I can tell you I would have coached him not to hold his own hand."

Do let your hands carry your message

Sandberg often used her hands for emphasis and to walk her audience through points in her arguments. These moves helped clarify her statements. In high-pressure situations, moving your hands won't just help you prove your point more authentically, but it can add to a sense of warmth and help you seem more conversational.

"We have more faith and confidence in someone who speaks with their hands because in our primitive days, we had to read body language to tell if someone was trustworthy, a friend or a foe," Cobb says. "We trust people who show their hands because it gives the impression that you have nothing to hide."

Do show you care — don't just say that you do

While Dorsey remained mostly expressionless, Sandberg made expressions of concern, disgust and in at least one instance, put her hand over her heart to signal how deeply she cared about an issue.

"She had the right words, but her body language made the viewer feel as though she believed what she was saying and that's essential," Civiello says.

Do see eye-to-eye

Throughout the hearing, Dorsey and Sandberg held eye contact with the senators, even through their prepared statements. The effect helped both look attentive and engaged. In the U.S., Cobb explains, eye contact is especially important because it lets people know that you're interested in what they're saying. It's also a sign of respect, he says.

Keep eye contact in check. In low-pressure situations, note when you look down at your feet and when you look up at someone's eyes. When you find yourself in a higher-stakes situation, check that your eyes are focused on the person with whom you're communicating.

As important as it is to maintain good eye contact, [behavioral analysis expert Tonya Reiman](#) says this doesn't always mean a person is being truthful.

"While this does not indicate honesty — a good liar can hold eye contact throughout an entire fabricated story — the listener does perceive that the

speaker is being truthful," Reiman says. The fact that lowered eyes can build distrust makes it all the more important for sincere people to ensure their messages are perceived that way.

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Zameena Meja
News Associate, CNBC Make It

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