

Body Language: Attracts or Distracts

Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly reading and being read by others. Even without the utterance of words, language of the body speaks volumes. Often, interpreting body language is a subconscious thing. We may not make a conscientious effort to think through all the details of *why* someone has just folded their arms across their chest and narrowed their eyes at us, yet somehow this body language registers enough subliminally that we still feel uneasy. The subconscious instantaneously interprets these actions to indicate resistance, suspicion, or spite, even if we have not made a conscious study of the opposing person or their background.

Using body language to its fullest not only involves mastering your own use of outward gestures to create and maintain rapport, but also entails acquiring the ability to read the body language of another person. When you can effectively read body language, you can identify the emotions and discomfort of others. You can see tension and disagreement. You can feel rejection and suspicion. You have to understand that your body language adds or detracts from your message. In other words, your subconscious gestures and expressions can either help or hurt your ability to persuade others. You can create rapport by understanding and adopting the right body postures and countenances for your prospect.

Everything about you, be it outward or subtle, communicates something to somebody else. The words you use, your facial expressions, what you do with your hands, your tone of voice, and your level of eye contact will determine whether people accept or reject you and your message. To be persuasive, you have to present not only openness, but also authority.

Albert Mehrabian says we are perceived in three ways:

1. 55% Visually (Body Language)
2. 38% Vocally (Tone of Voice)
3. 7% Verbally (Spoken Words)

Other research estimates that as much as 93% of your message's impact depends on nonverbal elements. This includes facial expressions, body movement, vocal cues, and proxemics.

Body language and gestures are an innate part of our psyche. There have been many interesting studies conducted on body language and the use of gestures. In one particular experiment, twelve children with perfect vision and twelve children who were blind since birth were observed to see if either group gestured more than the other. The results showed that the blind children actually gestured just as much as their full-sighted counterparts, even when they knowingly spoke with other blind children. The researchers concluded that gesturing is an innate part of our expressive and communicative patterns, and that speech and body language are highly interconnected. Furthermore, the researchers asserted that speech and body language also bear strong ties to our thought processes. An article in the American Journal of Psychology talked about

how gesturing can serve as a memory aide. Subjects had a more difficult time remembering words when they had to keep their hands holding on to a bar than when their hands were free.

There is a direct correlation between our ability to read body language and our relationships. In another study, college students were tested to see if they could accurately identify the meanings behind certain facial expressions and tones of voice. Significantly, the research consistently showed that the students who made the most errors in interpreting the meanings were those who had troubled relationships and/or greater feelings of depression.

a) Eyes

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The eyes of men converse as much as their tongues.” The more common phrase we hear is the “eyes are the windows to the soul.” Through our eyes, we can gauge the truthfulness, intelligence, attitude, and feelings of a speaker. *Not* making eye contact when we ought to can have devastating results. Note the following true example: Pennzoil Oil took the Texaco Oil Company to court over Texaco’s allegedly interfering with a contract Pennzoil already had with Getty Oil. Throughout the trial, Pennzoil’s counsel was accused of trying to sway the jury by encouraging their witnesses to make eye contact and joke with the jurors. To show who they were serious and did not consider the circumstances a joking matter, Texaco’s counsel told witnesses not to joke at all and to avoid eye contact with the jurors. Unfortunately, the advice proved to be unwise and cost Texaco dearly in the end. Pennzoil was granted more than \$2.5 billion in damages – the largest damage award in U.S. history! *Why?* Afterwards, jurors expressed distrust toward the witnesses who had avoided eye contact, even going so far as to call them “arrogant” and “indifferent.”

Our eyes’ pupils are one of the most sensitive and complicated parts of our body. They react to light but they also respond to our emotions, betraying a variety of feelings. When a person is aroused, interested, and receptive, the pupils dilate. This is an attempt by the eye to allow the entry of more light and more information. Being able to see each other’s pupils is so important to our communication that we often distrust a person wearing sunglasses. Consciously or subconsciously, we assume that use of the glasses is a direct attempt to hide the eyes in fear that they will reveal the truth.

Making eye contact can also convey love or passion. In a number of studies on eye contact and attraction, researchers found that simply looking into one another’s eyes can create passionate feelings. In one particular case, two members of the opposite sex who were complete strangers were found to have amorous feelings toward each other after merely gazing into one another’s eyes. In another study, beggars were interviewed about their “tactics” for getting donations from passersby. Several of the beggars stated that one of the very first things they tried to do was establish eye contact. They claimed that making eye contact made it harder for people to pretend they hadn’t seen them, to ignore them, or to just keep walking. Other studies have shown that public speakers that make more eye contact, use pleasant facial expressions, and incorporate appropriate gestures into their speeches have more persuasive power than speakers who do not.

b) Hands

The way we use our hands tells others a lot about what we are thinking or feeling. For example, if your hands are tucked away in your pockets or behind your back, you may be perceived as holding something back. Clenched fists may portray anger or tension. Holding your hands up around your face – over your mouth, by your ear, etc. – may portray dishonesty. Stroking your chin shows you are thinking about what has been said. If you place your hands flat on the table in front of you, you may be sending a signal that you agree. On the other hand, placing your hands on your hips may express defiance or dominance.

The way we shake hands also tells people a lot about us. It is customary in business situations to shake hands with someone when we first meet them or when we are sealing a deal. Even if we don't realize it, a firm handshake conveys cooperation and alliance. Weak or limp handshakes, on the other hand, portray just that: weakness, incompetence, or maybe even disinterest. Be sure your handshakes are always firm and appropriately energetic.

c) Head

If you notice your prospect tilting his head toward you, it is very likely that he is interested in the deal. If his head is tilted away, however, he may not be totally sold, and, in fact, he may feel some distrust or dissatisfaction toward you or the offer. If he rests his head on his hand, he is bored or not really interested. If he keeps looking around, you can bet he is most likely thinking: "Get me out of here." Obviously, nodding his head would express agreement and interest.

d) Legs

If your prospect is pointing his feet in your direction, he is most likely facing you and is therefore likely to be very interested in your offer. If his legs or feet are pointed away from you, however, he may just be enduring your pitch and may be feeling ready to leave as soon as he has the opportunity. If his legs are crossed when he stands, he may still be feeling some awkwardness about the deal. On the other hand, if his legs are crossed when he is seated, he may be feeling some resistance to you or your offer. If his legs are tucked up under his bottom, he feels comfortable in your presence and enjoys visiting with you. If he keeps tapping his foot, he's either wishing you would shut up and let him talk or he's feeling bored.

Other Types of Nonverbal Communication

As mentioned above, putting your hands or fingers to your nose or mouth can send a message that you are lying. As a general rule, keep your hands away from your face and head when engaging in the persuasion process. Here are a few more nonverbal indicators:

- Leaning closer = interest and comfort
- Learning away = discomfort with the facts or with the person presenting them
- Nodding = interest, agreement, and understanding

- Relaxed posture = openness to communicate
- Hand to cheek = evaluating or considering
- Sitting with hands clasped behind head = arrogance or superiority
- Tapping or drumming fingers = impatience or annoyance
- Steepling fingers = closing off or creating barrier
- Fidgeting = boredom, nervousness, or impatience
- Clutching objects tightly = anxiety or nervous anticipation
- Chin stroke = deep thinking or intently listening

From what we have discussed, you can see that resistance can be easily detected in your prospect. Check to see if your prospect's body is leaning away from you. Observe whether he faces you at an angle. Look to see whether his arms, legs, or both are crossed. He may glance from the corner of the eye and make minimal eye contact. He may tap his finger or foot –or his feet may point away from you. He may refuse to unbutton his jacket. Generally, if he is resisting your persuasive efforts, his posture is closed. When you persuade, avoid adopting this body language. By opening yourself up, you may prompt him to follow suit.

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