

Body language gives away your intent

By Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Brandon was a 22-year-old I happened to meet at a speed networking event hosted by my local Chamber of Commerce. His ability to connect with me instantly was impressive. Without saying a word, and even before we shook hands, he let me know that he was truly anxious to meet me. It was so powerful that when we did shake hands a second or two later, rather than say “It’s nice to meet you,” I said, “Congratulations, you are going to be a very wealthy man.”

The gift that young man had was an amazing control of the body language he exhibited when we first met. He made great eye contact and showed by his facial expression that he truly wanted to get to know me. It was the kind of expression you see on the face of that one puppy in the pen at the pet shop that just captures your heart instantly.

Our body language gives away what is going on in the back of our minds. It is extremely difficult to hide our pattern of thoughts; they just come out of every part of our bodies naturally.

I have been studying body language for about 40 years, and there is still a lot to learn. The topic is extremely engaging and insightful. The language we use to communicate with others through facial and body expression is far more complex and intricate than any verbal language.

We know many of the signals intuitively, but we also miss many important signals that are hidden to us. Here are some ways to recognize the amazing power of being able to read signals — and a warning not to rely on body language signals too much.

The truth is that understanding body language correctly requires more than just knowing particular body positions and their meaning. You can never be certain that a particular kind of body language is a true signal, just a random event or a misleading gesture. The way to increase the odds of interpreting body language correctly is to study what the different signals mean, then apply the following areas to your interpretation. These five C’s will help you interpret body language correctly.

1. Context

You must consider what is going on around the signal, what happened just before, where the person is located, what else is going on, etc. For example, if I am talking with you and I scratch my nose, it probably means I have an itch on my nose. But if I am on the witness stand and have not touched my nose for an hour, there is a different context. When the prosecutor asks me about the bloody knife and my finger goes to the side of my nose as I answer the question, that is a strong indication that I am lying (or at least exaggerating).

2. Clusters

Since many body language signals are going on with each person at any given time, you should not ascribe heavy meaning to any single one. Instead, look for patterns or clusters. I can witness you rubbing your palms, blinking rapidly, arm hair standing up, foot movements, heavy swallowing and shifting of weight. I also might notice more perspiration than normal. With a cluster of signals like these, I can be certain you are experiencing anxiety.

3. Congruence

If your words, your tone of voice and your body language are telling me the same thing, chances are I am getting a true signal. When you are saying one thing, but your body language shows a different pattern, I need to realize that you may be trying to deceive me in some way. I need to be vigilant and test more for congruence. If there are several indications of incongruence, it could signal that you are not telling me the full truth.

4. Consistency

Look for patterns in people's behavior. If a student in one of my classes habitually likes to sit with her arms folded because that is a comfortable position for her, then that is a baseline — I should not think it is a signal when she folds her arms. If another person who rarely folds his arms does so immediately after making a statement about his boss, I might suspect he is being defensive and look for other signals to corroborate the suspicion.

5. Culture

People tend to forget that cultural differences in body language are huge. For example, if you are an Eskimo, moving your head up and down means “no,” while shaking your head from side to side means “yes.” An obvious difference in culture is the issue of proximity. When talking with a person from a Middle Eastern culture, expect the gap between you and the other person to be significantly less than when addressing a person from a western culture.

Correct interpretation of body language has to factor into these five areas. Taking them into account allows us to be more accurate when we read meaning to body language. Become a student of body language yourself. You will find it is a vital skill, and the more you develop it, the more you will improve both your ability to understand the intentions of others and send more-consistent signals yourself.

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