

Five Mistakes People Make
Reading Body Language

—

And Five Nonverbal Signals
That Send Positive Messages

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FIVE MISTAKES PEOPLE MAKE READING BODY LANGUAGE

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Body language was the basis for our earliest form of communication when the split-second ability to recognize if a person or situation was benign or dangerous was often a matter of life or death.

Today, nonverbal signals play a key role in helping us form quick impressions. But, as innate as this ability may be, not all of our impressions are accurate. Although our brains are hardwired to respond instantly to certain nonverbal cues, that circuitry was put in place a long time ago – when our ancient ancestors faced threats and challenges very different from those we face in today’s modern society. The problem is that the world has changed, but our body reading processes are still based on a primitive emotional reaction that hasn’t changed much since humans began interacting with one another.

For example: In our prehistory, it may have been vitally important to see an approaching person's hands in order to evaluate his intent. If hands were concealed they could very well be holding a rock, a club, or other means of doing us harm. In business interactions today, with no logical reason to do so, we still instinctively mistrust someone who keeps his hands out of sight -- in his pockets, below the table, or behind his back.

Your nonverbal signals don't always convey what you intended them to. The following is adapted from my new book, "The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead." Here are the five mistakes people make when they read body language – and five nonverbal signals that almost always send the "right" message.

MISTAKES

1 THEY WON'T CONSIDER THE CONTEXT.

When it comes to body language, context is king. You can't really make sense of someone's nonverbal message unless you understand the circumstances behind it. Context is a weave of variables including location, relationships, time of day, past experience, and even room temperature. Depending on the context, the same nonverbal signals can take on totally different meanings.

Your team members and colleagues won't always have access to this insight. So if you yawn in a staff meeting because you were up early for an international business call – let people know why you're tired. Without this context, you'll look like you're just bored.

2 THEY'LL FIND MEANING IN ONE GESTURE.

People are constantly trying to evaluate your state of mind by monitoring your body language. But all too often they will assign meaning to a single (and sometimes irrelevant) nonverbal cue. And, since the human brain pays more attention to negative messages than it does to positive ones, people are mainly on the alert for any sign that indicates you're in a bad mood and not to be approached.

So – you may be more comfortable standing with your arms folded across your chest (or you may be cold), but don't be surprised when others judge that gesture as resistant and unapproachable.

3 THEY WON'T KNOW YOUR BASELINE.

One of the keys to accurately reading body language is to compare someone's current nonverbal response to their baseline, or normal behavior. But if people haven't observed you over time, they have little basis for that comparison.

Remember this when meeting people for the first time. They won't know that you habitually frown when you are concentrating. (And you may not realize it either unless you ask a friend or coach for feedback.) Others will most likely think the frown is a reaction to something they said or did.

4 THEY'LL EVALUATE YOU THROUGH AN ARRAY OF PERSONAL BIASES.

There is a woman in my yoga class who liked me from the moment we met. I'd prefer to believe that this was a result of my charismatic personality, but I know for a fact that it's because I resemble her favorite aunt.

Sometimes biases work in your favor – an example of the so-called “halo effect.” But biases can also work against you. What if, instead of someone they like, you remind people of someone they despise? You might overcome it with time, but you can bet that their initial response to you won't be a good one.

5 THEY'LL EVALUATE THROUGH A FILTER OF CULTURAL BIASES.

When it comes to nonverbal communication and cultural differences, you can expect to be judged by behaviors that include how close you stand to a colleague in conversation, how much or little you touch others, the degree of emotion in your voice, the amount of eye contact you display, and the kind of hand gestures you use. And what feels so right in one culture may be seen as highly insulting in another. (So before you attend that international business meeting, do a little research to on the nonverbal business practices that you're most likely to encounter.)

These are the five mistakes you can expect people to make. And here are five nonverbal signals that almost always send a positive message:

THE “RIGHT” SIGNALS

1 FACE PEOPLE DIRECTLY.

Even a quarter turn away creates a barrier (the “cold shoulder”), signaling a lack of interest and causing the speaker to shut down. Physical obstructions are especially detrimental to the effective exchange of ideas. Take away anything that blocks your view or forms a barrier between you and the rest of the team. Close your laptop, turn off your cell phone, put your purse or briefcase to the side.

2 MAINTAIN POSITIVE EYE CONTACT.

Looking at someone's eyes transmits energy and indicates interest. As long as you are looking at me, I believe that I have your full attention. Eye contact is most effective when both parties feel its intensity is appropriate for the situation. This may differ with introverts/extroverts, men/women, or between people of different cultures; but in general, greater eye contact—especially in intervals lasting four to five seconds—almost always leads to a greater level of approval.

3 USE OPEN GESTURES.

Keeping your movements relaxed, using open arm gestures, and showing the palms of your hands – are all silent signals of credibility and candor. Individuals with open gestures are perceived more positively and are more persuasive than those with closed gestures (arms crossed, hands hidden or held close to the body, etc.)

4 USE YOUR HEAD.

The next time you are in a conversation where you're trying to encourage the other person to speak more, nod your head using clusters of three nods at regular intervals. Research shows that people will talk three to four times more than usual when the listener nods in this manner. You'll be amazed at how this single nonverbal signal can trigger such a positive response

5 ACTIVATE YOUR SMILE POWER.

The human brain prefers happy faces, recognizing them more quickly than those with negative expressions. Most important, smiling directly influences how other people respond to you. When you smile at someone, he or she almost always smiles in return. And, because facial expressions trigger corresponding feelings (a reaction called “facial feedback,”) the smile you get back actually changes that person's emotional state in a positive way. This one simple act will instantly and powerfully send a message of warmth and welcome.

Remember that team members will be watching *all* the time, and they will be waiting to see if your behavior is congruent in both formal and informal settings. When one CEO hosted a corporate function designed to gather ideas from participants, he sent all the right nonverbal signals during the presentations – nodding, smiling, etc. – but spent the breaks sitting far away from the group, reading a newspaper. It was only natural shyness that caused him to withdraw, but by now I'm sure you can accurately guess how the other people in the group evaluated his behavior.

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