



Learn Body Language

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

What is the most frequent employee complaint on Quality-of-Life surveys conducted in organizations? It is "not enough effective communication" (Chilingherhan, Credit Union Times, June 22, 2011). That is frustrating to managers and leaders who spend a lot of time and energy trying to communicate well. It turns out that nearly all of us have been saddled with a significant gap in our personal education. Most of us have never taken a course on how to read body language.

It is well known that humans communicate more through body language and tone of voice than they do with the words used to send messages (Mehrabian, A. 2009 "Silent Messages: A Wealth of Information About Nonverbal Communication"). It would be smart for all of us to take several courses in school on reading and controlling body language. Unfortunately most people are never exposed to formal training in this vital skill.

I find the topic of body language to be incredibly interesting, and I teach it in all my classes. I am an avid student myself trying to learn more all the time. I believe knowing this "language" is vital because, like it or not, we are sending hundreds of messages to others all the time that give them the opportunity to correctly or incorrectly decode our thoughts and intentions.

On the receiving side, we are bombarded with conscious and subconscious cues coming from other people. If we are not sensitive to the meaning being communicated, then we can take actions or make statements that are unwise, insensitive, or just plain dangerous.

It is relatively easy to get an education in body language if one is interested. There are numerous books on it and many good video disks that can illustrate the complexity. One of my favorite treatments is a DVD called "Advanced Body Language," by Bill Acheson (www.seminarsonDVD.com). There are also many short Youtube videos that can help as well. Just go to Google and type "body language" for a full array of insightful help.

Many of these resources are fun because they frequently lampoon the missed or mixed signals we sent to each other.

It is important to take the context and pattern of body language into account when we try to interpret meaning. For example, one typical piece of body language is when a person is talking and he puts his finger up to the side of his nose. That is generally thought to be a sign of exaggerating or lying, but it could just mean that the person has an itch. In fact, in Bill Acheson's video, he makes frequent gestures with a finger to the side of his nose. It is a habitual gesture for him, and he does it unconsciously. Imagine, a full time expert on body language giving an ambiguous signal like that roughly every five minutes. It demonstrates two points 1) do not interpret all signals literally, and 2) you are often not conscious of the body language signals you are sending out.

The point I am making here is that if you are not studying and learning all you can about body language, then your education is incomplete and your communication is hampered. Get online and start learning all you can about the signals we send each other. Become sensitive to the cultural differences in body language because each culture has a unique set of signals that need to be factored into any dealings.

Do not take every piece of body language as a literal signal. Rather, look for patterns that can explain what is behind the words. Consider the context around the body language signal so that its meaning is more precise. You will find yourself becoming a lifelong student of body language, and your level of communication, both going out and coming to you to be vastly richer.



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