

5 C's of Body Language

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The study of body language has fascinated me for years. There are over 30,000 known signals in body language and facial expression that we interpret, mostly subconsciously. It is a favorite game at cocktail parties, or in other public venues, to try to uncover the meaning ascribed to certain types of body language.

The truth is that understanding body language correctly requires more than just knowing the particular body positions and their meaning. You can never be certain if a particular kind of body language is a true signal or 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 5 C's to your interpretation:

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 will usually mean I have an itch on my nose. But, if I am on the witness stand and have not touched my nose for an hour, it 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 there are dozens of body language signals going on with each person at any given time, you should not ascribe heavy meaning to any single one. Instead, look for clusters. If I see 5 indications in your body language that you are experiencing anxiety, the symptoms start to add up. I can witness you rubbing your palms, rapid blinking, hair on arms standing out, foot movement, heavy swallowing, and shifting of weight. I might also notice more perspiration than normal. With signals like these, I can be pretty certain you are anxious.

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 be alert 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, I should conclude you are not telling me the full truth.

4. Consistency

Look for patterns in people's behavior. I might have you as a student in my class and notice you are holding your head up with the palm of your hand. I might conclude you are bored with this lecture, but as I look for consistency I see a pattern. You have shown other signs of fatigue since you arrived for class this evening. A few questions might confirm that you were up all last night with the baby. It had nothing to do with the quality of my lecture.

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.

It is critical to understand the body language patterns in the culture you are currently in, as they may significantly modify the message. A great book to help you sort out these differences, particularly if you travel a lot of business, is *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries*, by Terri Morrison, Wayne Conway, and George Borden, Ph.D.

Once you become adept at reading body language, you will be more likely to read the intentions and meaning of other people and also improve your own ability to project your intentions accurately. It is one of the best ways to improve your communication skills.

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