

Body Language 2

The Five C's of Body Language

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Interpreting the body language of others or ourselves is an art form. If you can do this well, you have an incredible advantage that can help you make better decisions and take more appropriate actions. In this series I will be covering hundreds of typical signals we give out with our body language.

The entire body of work needs to be tempered with what I call the Five C's of Body Language. These are cautionary areas where we might unwittingly misinterpret some body language we are seeing. Knowing and taking these concepts into account will improve your accuracy of interpretation regardless of the specific body language you are witnessing.

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, and all other factors. 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.

Here is another example; if I raise my hand and then move so my palm is down while we were sitting in a quiet theater, it would mean "be quiet." If, however, I made the same gesture while we were racing to get to a hospital after an accident, it would more likely mean "remain calm."

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. Taking any one of those signals as the only indication, my guess that you are anxious is a lot weaker.

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.

For example, suppose I have an argument with my supervisor and she stomps off to her office. I wait for an hour then approach her humbly with a question, "Are you still mad at me?" If she wheels around with furrowed brow and crossed arms and says in a stern voice, "NO!" I can be pretty certain that she really meant to say, "YES!"

Congruence in body language has a lot to do with creating higher trust. When your body language is consistent with your verbal cues, you are being more authentic, and this consistency demonstrates you are a trust worthy person.

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.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/Bodylanguage or on this blog.

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 600 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763***

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