

Body Language 3

Body Position Tells a Lot

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Interpreting body language is an extremely complex science, as we will see in this series. However, we can pick up huge clues as to what is going on simply by observing the position of one's body in space. Later in the series we will add details of facial expression and gestures, but this article focuses on grasping the big picture first.

We take in a lot of information simply by observing how the person is sitting or standing. For example, I was once meeting a good friend for lunch. We knew each other very well and were meeting to catch up on what was happening for each of us. I entered the restaurant and saw my colleague sitting in a booth with her back to me. She did not see me come in. As I made my way to the table, I said to myself, "Oh dear, Karen is having a crisis." I could only see the back of her head and the angle of her shoulders, but I accurately observed a woman who was deep into a personal crisis in her life.

The trick here was knowing her habitual posture of sitting tall with head held high. When I observed her bent-over shoulders and bowed head, I figured either she was praying or feeling a great weight. Since it would be not like her to pray in public, it was easy to deduce she was in crisis.

Here is another example: I was once approaching a young man whom I had not met yet. I immediately observed that he: 1) took care of himself physically, 2) was an educated, polite, and articulate person, 3) knew how to dress properly for the occasion, and most importantly 4) was anxious to meet me. All of these traits were easy to spot, even before I observed his facial expression or we had shaken hands or spoken any words. All these clues were evident by the way he was walking and carrying himself.

Let's imagine a female, but blank out her facial expression for an experiment. She is standing at a slight angle to you, but mostly directly facing you. Her hands are on her hips. Her head is erect and her shoulders are slightly to the rear. Her legs are straight and rigid. If that image of a woman does not cause you to cower a bit, whether you are male or female, you are not paying attention. We do not need the detail in her fingers or facial expression to accurately deduce that she is upset, and since she is facing you, it is pretty obvious you had better do some serious groveling.

Just for fun, let's do another example. We see a picture of a man who is sitting in a straight chair with one hand on the arm of the chair and the other one extended with palm up. The man's legs are crossed at the ankle in a relaxed position but his back and

head are straight upright. We cannot see anything else, but could quickly deduce a few things about this scene.

It is implied that there is a second person here because of the man's outreached hand. He is making a point to the other person, and, since his palm is up, he is advocating something (if he was pointing or had clenched fist we would deduce something different). There is an implied table or desk between the two people due to the way his legs are crossed. Since he is advocating something and is sitting erect, it is easy to guess that this is not a casual conversation about the weather or something trivial. This is an important conversation for the man. It could be a performance appraisal or a job interview. Notice how much meaning is implied from just a few nebulous clues and no detail.

In the real world, we have the general shape of a person to get us pointed in the right direction, then we add the more specific clues of facial expression or gestures to fill in the picture and increase our accuracy of decoding the scene.

Exercise for you today

Notice today how much information you can gather about a person's mental state even before you take into account the more precise clues of facial expression and gestures. Also notice how something seems off kilter when you observe a person and the body position is incongruent with the facial expression.

Notice also how much more likely you are to trust your initial reaction to a person if his or her body language is easy to interpret and not ambiguous. We sense these things instinctively and at a subconscious level before we are even aware of them consciously.

Congruence in body language is a huge element because we verify accuracy by the clusters of body language. For example, if the woman I approached in the restaurant at the start of this article had on a broad smile when I got close enough to see her face, I would immediately assume she was trying to deceive me. The smile would not appear to be genuine. In that case, I would need to dig and test in a number of ways before ascribing any specific emotion.

Try to become a master of taking in both the big picture and the minute details of body language, and you will grow in your ability to decode information correctly.

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.

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