

Body Language 4

Facial Expressions

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The topic of facial expressions is endlessly fascinating. Keeping in mind that all body language is culture specific; still many of the facial expressions are the same no matter what culture is employing them. For example, a child in pain is going to have the same facial expression regardless of where in the world he or she originated. There are many generalities in facial expressions. For this series, I will key off the Western Cultures to make specific points. Where specific gestures mean different things, I will give some examples to clarify.

There are literally tens of thousands of different facial expressions we use to convey our emotions. It would be impossible to cover them all in one article, but I will lay out some details of the specific parts of the face in my articles over the next several weeks. In this article, I deal with the entire face as a unit.

As Bill Acheson points out in his series “Advanced Body Language,” (www.seminarsonDVD.com) most body language occurs at the subconscious level. We are giving off signals with all facets of body language every moment of the day. The part of body language that we control consciously is facial expressions. You can be having a bad day and still try to wear a pleasant expression. Or you can be quite happy but appear to be angry if you wish. The problem is that when you try to force an expression that is not congruent with the remainder of your body language, it appears phony.



Take the example of the person in the picture at the left. He has a smile on his face, but his posture is not consistent with someone who is happy. His arms are crossed and he has a slouch. His eyes are squinting. The smile is not convincing and looks pasted on. While he is trying to look happy, the incongruent body language reveals another agenda. We are not really sure what the message is, but it sure isn't a congenial look of happiness.

We can convey all kinds of emotions just by our facial expressions. For example, as you are reading this, can you convey the following emotions accurately:

Anger
Fear
Love
Happiness

Pain
Surprise
Disgust
Contempt

I think you will agree that it is rather easy to convey these emotions through facial expression. In his program Bill Acheson shares some research that there is one emotion that men can convey with far greater accuracy than women. That emotion is guilt. His explanation is that for men, guilt is a two-person event "There's things these guys have done that they thought was funny as Hell till they got found out." For a woman, guilt is something that is experienced internally, so it is not easy for a female to show an expression of guilt.

One interesting exercise in reading facial expressions is provided by the Greater Good at Berkley Group. They have an online quiz that shows 20 facial expressions and you get to select from four possible explanations. The quiz is located at http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/ei_quiz/ You will find some of the expressions are easy to follow, but others are quite subtle.

Another example is to try to come up with a word that goes along with the following facial expressions.



For comparison to your list, here are the words I would use to describe these expressions in the order given. I do not expect us to agree on all of the interpretations, but I suspect many of them will be similar.

1. Pleased
2. Excited
3. Bummed
4. Coy
5. Upset
6. Calm
7. Exasperated
8. Incredulous
9. Scathing
10. Shocked
11. Pondering
12. Surprised
13. Withdrawn
14. Disgusted
15. Fatigued
16. Worried

Exercise for you today

Observe the facial expressions of your family and coworkers at a deeper level than normal today. Notice that you do this at a subconscious level every moment of the day. If you can make the practice more of a conscious activity, you will gain skill in this technique at a rapid rate.

Also notice how you react when one part of a facial expression seems to be at odds with the overall message. For example, if the general impression is a pleasant expression but the eyebrows are furrowed, then you would be less likely to trust your instincts about the person's true emotion.

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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