

Body Language 6

Folding Arms

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Folding arms when listening or speaking is a classic type of body language that has a few different interpretations depending on the circumstances when it is being applied. For example, if a student is sitting in a boring classroom for a long period and has folded arms, it would be a good idea to check the temperature of the room. The wrapping of arms around the torso helps to conserve heat and having the fingers wedged into the arm pits helps them from feeling cold due to poor circulation.



Folding arms can be somewhat different for women than men due to anatomical differences. Crossed arms gives a feeling of wholeness or snugness to a female that is not usually experienced by men. One can also deduce meaning from how the fingers are displayed. In this image, the fingers are relaxed, and when coupled with a natural smile, it basically looks like just a comfortable pose for the woman. It would likely mean something different if her fingers were clenched onto the arms. In that case, she would appear to be upset.

The classic meaning ascribed to folded arms is that of a person being defensive or closed. If someone is in a discussion in a warm room and when the topic becomes something related to that person's performance, you can often see the arms being crossed as a symbol of defensiveness. The message received by the other person is that the person is not entirely comfortable with this conversation and wants to be protected from damage. The gesture generally works against trust because information is perceived to be blocked.

Many signals in body language have explanations in anatomy. They are exaggerated contortions that relate to a specific and understandable bodily need at that time. In this instance the person is protecting the solar plexus, the one part of the mammal that is not protected by a skeletal structure, from possible harm. The motion is almost always done unconsciously, but it is a reasonable reaction to being attacked.



Political individuals are not exempt from using crossed arms. The classic arm crosser is Donald Trump. He habitually sits in meetings with arms crossed, and it is usually as show of defiance or power. He normally wears a suit coat, which makes the arm crossing look particularly awkward, but it is a common posture for him. He also normally hides his fingers when crossing his arms which adds to the awkward appearance. Coupled with his habitual facial expression, the

message becomes, “I am listening at the moment, and when you are through, I will tell you how it’s going to be.” He also keeps his arms crossed when both listening and talking.

A person who crosses arms and uncrosses them repeatedly within the space of a minute or so is emoting uncertainty or anxiety. The message is that the person is uncomfortable and does not know what to do with his or her arms and hands. If you encounter a person acting in this manner, try to give the individual the opportunity to talk. Switching from an absorbing mode to an advocating mode will often allow the person to calm down and relax a bit.

In summary, crossing arms is a common type of body language that can easily be misunderstood. Most commonly, it is interpreted as a gesture of defensiveness or being closed. As with all body language, you must consider the context in which the gesture is occurring and the details of the gesture itself.

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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