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Finger to the Side of the Nose

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Sometimes people will touch themselves in the facial area, and depending on the context leading to a gesture, where on the face the person touches can be instructive in decoding the meaning. Just like with all body language, we need to consider possible other logical explanations before ascribing specific meaning to a single gesture.

Touching the side of the nose is a telltail form of body language that is nearly always done unconsciously. If I touch the side of my nose when talking to you, it may just mean that I have an itchy nose at the moment. You need to consider that as one possible reason. But, if I am a witness on the stand in a court room and the opposing lawyer asks me to confirm or deny I ever saw the bloody knife, if my finger goes to my nose as I deny ever seeing the knife, it is a good indication that I am lying, or at least exaggerating.



In this picture we see a combination of things that modify the meaning. We see a playful expression with wide eyes and high eyebrows. Her head is slightly tilted indicating this may be a joke. She also has a broad smile showing off her dimples. In this case, touching the nose would indicate she is probably spinning a tall tale that may be for purposes of humor, or it may be an indication of an inside joke between you and her.

It is dangerous to ascribe meaning too quickly when observing this type of body language. The best thing to do is look for other signals to corroborate the meaning. For sure, something is going on when a person who does not have an itchy nose (such as you would see if she was scratching it repeatedly) touches his or her nose. Dig in and figure out the meaning from multiple angles.

It is also important to consider how well you already know and trust this person. If there is already high trust between you and the other person, the gesture may be a kind of caution flag that at this moment the other person is stretching a point. If there is low trust to begin with, the gesture would provide additional reason to question the sincerity of the person.

It is very difficult to catch yourself making this gesture. It is almost always done involuntarily. I do a lot of public speaking, and often video tape my work to uncover improvements. Sometimes I will see myself touching my nose when I was totally unaware of it during the program. When I go back and look, it is normally a point in the program where my confidence in what I am saying is not as high as other points.

Even Bill Acheson, the expert on body language, tends to touch his nose in presentations and probably only finds about it when he reviews his programs. The thing to remember is that body language rarely lies. You can try to fool people with fake body language, but what you send out is inconsistent signals that give away your discomfort. In general people are able to decode your true meaning even when you try to put on a show that is not what you are really feeling. To maintain maximum credibility, do not try to game your body language. You will gain more respect by being genuine at all times.

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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