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Fingers in the Collar

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Putting one's finger between the neck and collar is a common gesture that is rather easy to interpret. The gesture is much more common with males than females for a few reasons I will discuss later. The most frequent interpretation is anxiety due to some factor, such as low trust or guilt. A famous example is that of Lance Armstrong after it was revealed that he was lying about his doping. Here we see a number of factors that point to guilt. His lips are set but not frowning, his gaze is glazed and looking downward, and his finger is in his collar. When you see a cluster of body language like this, the confidence of a proper interpretation goes up dramatically.

The collar metaphor actually has a physiological basis, as is the case with many body language gestures. The overriding feeling is one of anxiety. The connotation is that the person needs to loosen his collar to get more air. You can see witnesses on the stand in a heated trial frequently trying to open their collars to get in more oxygen. When you see an individual putting a finger in his collar, look for other corresponding signs of anxiety, like shifting weight, wringing hands, or looking down.

Women use this gesture less often because they less frequently wear a tight collar with a tie. They also often have jewelry which might get tangled up if the gesture was tried. Interestingly, most women have a different type of experience when trying to demonstrate guilt through body language than men do.

According to Bill Acheson in his wonderful DVD "Advanced Body Language," guilt is the one emotion accurately conveyed by men that is not modeled nearly as well by women. The reason, he explains, is that for men, guilt is a two-part emotion. "There are things these guys have done that they thought was funny as Hell 'til they got found out." For women, guilt is usually an inside job. They do it to themselves. Bill sarcastically jokes that "it turns out that women are so busy creating it that they are not getting the practice time [showing it through a facial expression]."

There are several other reasons, besides guilt, that can cause men to pull at their collar. There is sometimes a kind of strangulation panic that sets in when some men wear a shirt and tie that are too tight. I am always much more comfortable with an open collar and no tie. It takes a very formal event for me to grudgingly button the top button on a shirt and put on a tie. I typically feel uncomfortable all evening and cannot wait to get rid

of the tie after the event. If the event has inherent stress, like a funeral or an important presentation, I suspect you would find me with my finger in my collar at some point.

Another reason to use the gesture is when the person is getting upset, which we call “getting hot under the collar.” Watch for a reddening of the face and puffy cheeks or bulging neck when the person is getting angry. Sometimes it looks like the person is trying to let out steam when using this gesture as a way to communicate rage.

Be alert for the gesture of loosening the collar, and you will begin to pick up more information than you have in the past when observing other people. Specifically, look to see if there are other signs of anxiety or anger that go along with the gesture. Also, try to be more aware of when you are using this gesture to communicate your own emotions.

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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