

Body Language 10

Scratching Head

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

This type of body language is very well known, and the meaning is hard to miss. Perhaps it is a bit more conscious than other BL gestures because we actually refer to it in daily conversation. We might say something like, “His actions yesterday really left me scratching my head.” The translation is one of confusion or not knowing how to interpret something.



The vision I have with this body language is stuck in my mind. I once saw a man who was driving a little black sports car. I came up upon him when his car was broken down by the side of the road. He had gotten out of the car and just raised the hood as I was going by. Out from the engine compartment steam was billowing out toward the man’s face. He stood there with his hand near the back of his head and fingers reaching down to scratch his head. It did not take a rocket scientist to derive the meaning of his gesture. It means, “What the heck is going on?”

Often there is a physiological explanation for a specific type of body language, such as the need for more oxygen leading to loosening of the collar. The link for scratching the head might originate in the inability of the brain to comprehend exactly what is happening at the moment. We may scratch our heads as a way to see more clearly the issue, much the same as when we rake leaves we can see the grass better.

In addition to confusion, this form of body language may signify doubt or uncertainty. In some circumstances, it may be an indication of lying. If someone starts to scratch his head while you are talking to him, check to see if the indication is that the person does not believe what you are saying. You would usually see another facial indication of doubt along with the head scratching.

For example, if the person furrows his brow while scratching his head, it may be a signal that you are damaging the trust this person had built up for you. Whatever the source of the emotion, the person making the gesture is usually not aware he is doing it, unless someone points it out. We see the behavior in others very quickly, but we are normally not conscious of when we do it ourselves.

The scratching head gesture may have a logical physical explanation such as eczema or severe dandruff. As with all body language, you need to consider the person’s habitual movements. If this person routinely scratches his head with no apparent stimulus, it is likely the problem is a physical itch rather than puzzlement.

The best way to grow in your interpretation of this type of body language is to catch yourself in the act and bring it to your conscious mind. You will be using your Reticular Activation System (RAS) to become more alert to the signals you send out.

The best way to describe RAS is with an example. You are driving down the highway, and you do not notice any specific pattern to the different makes and models of the cars and trucks. Your mind is focused on other things. Then you turn into a Ford dealership and look at a specific red Ford truck that you fancy. You have a negotiation with the dealer and get enough information to make a decision in the next couple days. As you drive back home, you will see every red Ford truck on the highway. You will be amazed at the number that are flowing by when you did not notice them at all on your way to the dealer. Your RAS will have been activated.

Use your RAS to sensitize yourself to the various body language signals you send and you will gain greater control of how you project your emotions to others.

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.

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 600 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763***

The
TRUST
Ambassador