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Foot or Finger Tapping

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Finger or foot tapping is another very well-known form of body language. The implication is almost always impatience. You might expect to see this gesture while at the counter in the airport waiting for the person behind the counter to finish fiddling with her computer and answer your question directly. You also can see it a lot in the classroom when teachers keep going over the same point in order to drum it into the brains of the slowest members of the class. Other members of the class will be tapping their fingers down on the table as an indication to “get on with it already!”

When a person ignores the person doing the finger tapping, it is a sign that the talker has low sensitivity. If this goes on for more than a few seconds, then trust between the people will begin to diminish. It is best to be alert for this obvious signal of impatience and at least acknowledge you have received the message through your own body language or modified cadence.



The same signal may be sent by tapping the foot, although there are a number of foot moves that make this area a bit more complicated to decode. If you are standing or sitting with your feet flat on the floor, then tapping your toes would have the same connotation as tapping your fingers, except that the gesture may be partially or totally hidden. Other foot movements may have different meanings.

For example, women habitually sit with legs crossed in what is known as the aristocratic leg cross. This is where one knee is placed directly over the second knee. [Miss. Manners](#) teaches that it is more professional to cross the legs at the ankles for modesty purposes, but the majority of female professionals I have observed actually cross their legs at the knees, as in this photo.

This is a comfortable position with females for two reasons. Women do not have external organs between their legs, so there is no specific pressure on these organs, as would be the case for a man. Second, when a woman is wearing a skirt, crossing her legs in this manner makes it less likely that other people will be seeing too much of her underwear.

When women sit with legs crossed in this manner, they will sometimes bounce the upper foot (the one that is not currently on the floor). They will also often dangle their shoe as they bounce the foot. This gesture can indicate a number of different things, so it is wise to exhibit care with interpreting what you see. It may be that the woman is exhibiting impatience, as with finger tapping. It may also indicate the woman is wanting to share some information, like telling a story, or visiting, or something else. She may also be bouncing as an indication of stress. In addition, letting the shoe dangle is thought to be an indication of flirting. You will need to look for more clues to get an accurate read.

Another interesting phenomenon with women's feet while sitting with legs crossed is pointed out by Bill Acheson in "Advanced Body Language." She may be happily sitting and bouncing her upper foot, and then, as a result of something said to her, point her toe upward for just a moment. The woman is having a negative reaction to what was just said. It can be a form of rejection. Sometimes the foot can speak as loudly as the mouth.



Because of anatomical differences, men usually sit with legs crossed in a stance that resembles the number four. Depending on age and culture, men will put their upper ankle to either the inside or outside of the lower knee. In some cultures, men will more often sit with the aristocratic leg cross. For example, this posture is more common in Europe.

Acheson believes that how a man crosses his legs is one indication of status in terms of wealth and power. Men of higher status will tend to sit using the aristocratic leg cross as opposed to the figure four leg cross. Also, men of higher power tend to lean back in a chair more decidedly than men of lesser wealth and power.

These gestures and body configurations are important to notice. It is also necessary to separate out habitual behavior from that triggered by a specific situation. If a person has a habit of sitting a certain way, then the signal is less apparent from a situation where the BL is triggered by a specific stimulus or statement.

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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