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Pulling on the Ear Lobe

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Pulling on the ear lobe is a gesture that you have seen from time to time, but if you are like me, you may have been unaware that it often has a specific meaning. Actually, there are many different interpretations of this gesture, as I will outline in this article. Be careful to get additional information before trying to ascribe meaning to a person who is pulling on his or her ear lobe when listening to you.

The first interpretation is that when a person is listening to you and is absent-mindedly pulling on his or her ear lobe, it is a signal that the person is interested in what you are saying and that you have the floor. As with most BL gestures, there is some element of physiological basis for the movement.



In this case, the best way to understand the underlying meaning is to exaggerate the gesture to make it more pronounced. If you were talking to me and I cupped my hand up to my ear in order to amplify the intake of sound waves, it would be a more overt form of pulling on the ear lobe. I am interested in hearing every part of what you are trying to convey. I do not want to miss any part of what you are saying.

When you see the gesture of someone pulling on his or her ear, continue to talk and know your input is of high interest.

Another interpretation is almost the exact opposite of the first one. In this case, pulling on the ear lobe is thought to be a way to block the information from coming in. The interpretation is that the person wants to “hear no evil.” The extreme form of this gesture is when children try to cover their ears when they do not want to hear what is being said.

If the interpretation is negative, it could be in reaction to increased stress because the person believes you are exaggerating or lying. The increased stress causes additional blood flow to the ear which may trigger pulling on the ear lobe.

Another interpretation of tugging on the ear lobe is that it could be just a physical itch from eczema behind the ear lobe or some other physical reason, such as a woman with an uncomfortable earring.

The easy way to detect if the gesture is one of interest or covering up a lie is to notice if the ear itself has turned red. A flushed ear or neck is a telltale sign of stress, so check

out the source of that stress before trying to interpret the meaning of the gesture. If increased stress is the case, trust is likely being compromised by continuing the conversation.

Be very careful when you are addressing a person and he or she is pulling on his earlobe. It could be a negative sign to interpret as blocking information or a positive sign to interpret as high interest. You need to judge which meaning is likely valid by observing the facial expression and including the context of what is going on when the gesture is made.

For example, if the forehead is wrinkled or the eyebrows furrowed, then you can assume the gesture is a negative one. If the forehead is high and the mouth has a slight smile, you can assume the person is interested in what you are saying. Keep in mind that clusters of body language increase the accuracy of proper interpretation, so look for multiple signs.

Look out for habitual gestures where a person does something all the time. I knew a man who would frequently stick the eraser end of a pencil in his ear and move it around like he was cleaning his ear, except he always did it only to the right ear. There was no particular significance to this habit, it was just sort of a nervous tick he had.

There is another BL gesture that is common, and this one usually signifies high interest on the part of the listener. It is putting something in his or her mouth as you are speaking.

It may be a paper clip, or the back end of a pen, or even the person's pinkie or thumb. The gesture is a desire for more information and is thought to be the equivalent to saying "feed me." I want to hear more of what you are saying.

Normally gestures that include hands to the facial region can have more than one meaning, and it is important to sort out the one indicated by what you are seeing. In most cases hands to the face indicate high interest, but you need to observe closely the concurrent other signals before interpreting these gestures.

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***

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