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The Eyes

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Of all the different types of body language, the eyes win the prize for conveying the most different meanings without speaking. This one aspect of body language alone could fill a whole book; in fact, there are many [such books](#) that deal with the language of the eyes only.

For this article, I will share some of the more powerful and well-documented eye gestures along with their meanings and some caveats to avoid misinterpreting eye gestures.

This article will highlight only the aspects of the eye itself and the eyelids (blinking). There are a huge number of additional meanings that we will add next week when we discuss the impact of eyebrows. For now, let's concentrate on the eye itself and the eyelids.

Eye Contact

The first aspect of body language with the eyes is eye contact. When you lock eyes with another person, it is called eye contact. You are looking directly into the soul of the other person using the eye like a window.

The percentage of time you look directly at the other person determines the rapport you will develop in that conversation. That rapport becomes the basis of growing trust.

According to [Bill Acheson](#) of the University of Pittsburgh, "If you have less than 70% eye contact with me, I will not trust you." On the other hand, staring at another person with nearly 100% eye contact creates a creepy feeling that also destroys trust. You need to break eye contact at least once a minute when talking to another individual, but it is important to keep the gaze to the facial region.

Gazing around the room will send a signal of disinterest, and scanning down the body will label you as a pervert. My own personal rule of thumb is to have between 50-80% eye contact with another individual in conversations that involve only the two of you.

Of course, if there are many people in the conversation, the eye contact for any specific individual will be much lower, as it is important to make eye contact with each person in the group.

There is another aspect with eye contact that can be very distracting if it is allowed to continue. The best way to describe it is with a personal example.

Early in my career, I was anxious to impress managers higher in the organization. I noticed in weekly staff meetings, my manager seemed to be looking at me a lot, even if I was not talking at the time. Eventually I started to become self-conscious about his aggressive eye contact, so I would look away quickly whenever that manager looked directly at me. I can recall becoming highly uncomfortable when sitting across the table from this manager and ended up sitting on the same side of the table from him to reduce the problem.

Pupil Dilation

Dilation of the pupils is also a major clue to what the other person is thinking. Normal dilation has the pupil (dark spot in the center of the eye) taking up roughly 30% -40% of the diameter of the iris (colored circle).

In this discussion, we need to separate out the impact of light levels and medical conditions on dilation. The iris dilates naturally in low light situations to allow more light to reach the retina, which allows people to see better in the dark. Likewise, in bright conditions the pupil will reduce in diameter to avoid overloading the retina. In addition to this normal metering of the pupil size due to ambient light, there are other factors that impact the size of the pupil.

One common situation is in response to some types of drugs on the system. The eye doctor puts drops in your eyes to dilate the pupils so that the retina can be observed more easily. Many of the psychedelic drugs have the same impact on dilation. This condition is medically called [mydriasis](#), and it is why police officers are trained to notice whether a person's eyes are dilated.

It is also possible that a person can have a disease or other eye condition that results in dilated pupils. When this condition is present, the pupils are generally habitually dilated. For purposes of interpreting body language through pupil dilation, we are interested in situations where normal dilation is observed, but then there is a noticeable opening of the pupils in response to some stimulus, like a pointed question or a threatening gesture.

Let's suppose you are in a moderately lighted environment and have had no drugs. What conditions might cause your eyes to become dilated involuntarily? This is where the body language aspect becomes very interesting. A person's pupils will dilate automatically in response to fear or desire.

The study of pupil size as an indicator of emotion is known as [pupillometrics](#). Eckhard Hess, a University of Chicago biopsychologist, did several experiments to determine cause and effect in the 1970s. He did extensive measurements of how attitude can be determined by pupil size. “The changes in emotions and mental activity revealed by changes in pupil size are clearly associated with changes in attitude.” In general, Hess measured that positive attitudes led to larger pupil size and negative attributes resulted in smaller pupil size.

Keep in mind that the dilation of your eyes is not possible for you to detect without looking in a mirror, yet it is an obvious signal that you make in the presence of others in response to a stimulus. This is just one of the reasons why it is nearly impossible to hide some feelings from people who understand body language.

Blinking Rate

Another obvious signal that is difficult for the person doing it to detect is blinking rate. Normally, adult humans blink at a rate between 15 to 20 times a minute. There are some situations where a person’s blink rate will be high most of the time. These would include wearing contact lenses and some diseases of the eye. Curiously, babies have a much longer rate and only blink a couple times a minute.

What is of interest in body language is whether there is a marked change in the blinking rate just after some situation or conversation. When a person is under stress, the blinking rate will start to increase without the person being aware of it. If you observe someone going from a normal 15 per minute rate to 30 to 40 blinks a minute, that person is likely under a great deal of stress, but is often trying to hide that fact.

I learned that lesson years ago when negotiating with a Japanese executive over price for some product. He tried the famous “Silent Treatment” with me in order to get a concession. Since I was aware of his ploy, I just stared back at him and watched his blink rate. I saw it double then double again until he finally caved in. I doubt that he even knew I was reading the stress level that was going on as observed in his blink rate.

Next time you are negotiating for a new car, recognize that the sales person is trained to watch your blink rate. If you are clever, you can reverse the logic and determine when the sales person is feeling the heat. Because you know this trick, you will be less likely to give away your stress level inadvertently.

This article is just the start of our discussion about body language of the eyes. When we couple the above ideas with what the larger facial muscles (cheeks and especially eyebrows) are revealing, the available information in the region of the eyes will become exponentially more complex and interesting. My article next week will dig into these gestures.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

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