

## Body Language 21

### The Mouth

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Body language gestures of the mouth are usually straightforward, but there are some tricky nuances to consider. First we will consider the most recognizable gesture: the smile. Actually, there are many different types of smiles to identify.

### Smiles



**Duchenne Smile** – This is a highly recognizable smile, but only a small portion of the population can model it well. The smile actually starts with the eyes. You can see a twinkle in the eye and a slight but natural squint that produces crow’s feet at the corners. The cheeks are elevated and the entire face, including the mouth takes the shape of an oval.

The corners of the mouth are raised through the Zygomatic Major Muscle. Those people who can accomplish a

Duchenne Smile have a huge advantage, because trying to force the face to this configuration often looks phony as described below.

**Non-Duchenne Smile** – this is where the mouth forms a shape by raising the corners of the mouth through the Zygomatic Major muscle but without the effect of “smiling eyes.” The smile is confined to the mouth region only, so it does not have the holistic appearance of a true Duchenne Smile and often is interpreted as being duplicitous or at least insincere.

**The Botox Smile** – This smile looks pasted on and is perfunctory for service people who wish to look pleasant but it comes across as insincere. It is also known as the “Pan Am” smile after flight attendants who were instructed to flash a pasted-on smile at each customer. This smile is also seen on the faces of beauty pageant contestants while they are being judged.

**Tight Lipped Smile** – As the name implies, this smile is characterized by not showing any teeth. Depending on the circumstance, this smile can convey approval or

precaution. According to Bill Acheson in “Advanced Body Language,” one cardinal rule when meeting a person for the first time is to smile naturally but make it broad enough that you show your teeth. He explains that the custom is a carry over from when the condition of a person’s teeth was an indication of status.

**Pulled Smile** – also known as the “smug smile” this is where the mouth is pulled to a smile configuration, but on one side only. Generally, this configuration suggests some form of agenda going on, and it is not a smile that invites high trust in the individual. The extreme form of a pulled smile was demonstrated by McKayla Maroney in the 2012 Olympics when she was awarded the silver medal in the vault. She contorted her face pulling her mouth entirely to one side to indicate she was “not impressed” with the performance of the other gymnasts or the judges. This contorted smile was made into a meme that became a PR issue.

**Laughing Smile** – Occasionally you will see a person make a smile with his or her mouth wide open. It is as if there was a laugh that was frozen in time. This smile also tends to lower trust, because it is seen as less than authentic.

## Frowns

**Classic Frown** – We are all familiar with a frown brought on by the person feeling negative about something. The lips are pulled downward and often the head and gaze go down as well. This is the look you see on football players’ faces when they have lost a close game. Another place to see a classic frown is at a funeral. This is also an habitual expression on the face of Donald Trump when he is trying to negotiate something.

**Clenched Teeth** – This type of frown has the additional element of clenched teeth, which causes the jaw muscle to pop out. I once had a boss who did this whenever he was really upset. It was a telltale sign to watch out if his jaws popped out and became red.

**Puffed Cheeks** – Occasionally you may encounter a person who frowns but then fills up his cheeks with air. This is an indication of exasperation; it is like the person is getting ready to blow up.

## Other Mouth Gestures

**Puckering up** – This gesture can have different meanings based on the context. It may mean that the person is deep in thought. It could mean you are getting the kiss off by the individual. If done softly and delicately it may be an actual signal of blowing a kiss.

**Twitching** – Some people will have an involuntary twitch. Most common is the twitch of the upper lip. If you see this gesture in a person, it may be habitual and be of little significance in terms of body language. Watch to see if the twitch comes just after a particular person addresses him or when something that may be sensitive comes up. If

a person twitches during stressful conversation, it is a great clue to use when observing his level of stress in the future. I knew a university dean who would twitch whenever he was stressed. He was aware that he was sending signals, but he could not stop it.

**Covering the Mouth** – The classical interpretation of this gesture is that the person is lying or telling a half truth and covers his mouth to avoid detection. That may be true in some circumstances, but covering the mouth can also be a reaction to being embarrassed; it may also be out of fear of halitosis. The best advice when you see a person covering his or her mouth is to gather more data to see if there is some pattern.

**Wiping the Mouth** – This may be a function of the saliva getting into the corners of the mouth. Some people struggle with that problem and need to wipe their mouth many times when speaking in public.

**Biting the Lip** – This gesture is usually related to insecurity, and it is normally the lower lip that is involved. As with all body language, it is important to notice the pattern of making this gesture. If it is at a logical point where the person may be feeling insecure, then the interpretation is likely correct. There could be another cause, so be alert for other signals. Bill Clinton was famous for using this gesture in his more infamous moments.

The gestures in this article were some of the more common mouth configurations you are likely to encounter. There are other, more subtle gestures you may see as well. The best advice is to keep track of a person's habitual behavior, and then you can use that baseline pattern to assess what is happening with the individual.

*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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