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Micro Expressions

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Of all the different types of body language gestures, I find the topic of Micro Expressions to be the most fascinating. Let me first define the concept and why it contains so much information, then I will follow with several examples and references so you can study this nearly endless and intriguing area of body language.

A micro expression is a very quick departure from the ambient body language and it is usually in response to a reaction inside the person to something said or something going on in his mind. The duration of a micro expression is usually about 1/30 of a second. It is faster than a blink, yet it contains all kinds of information about the mental state of the person.

The scary part about micro expressions is that the person doing it is almost never aware of doing it. It happens so fast and is part of the total mental state of the person that there is no cognition of it happening. However, and this is the dangerous part, the gesture is very evident to the other person, either on a conscious or subconscious level.

Let me share an example so you can see how fleeting these expressions are. Here is a video of me talking about [“Planting a Seed of Trust in the First 10 seconds.”](#) I give several tips to enhance trust when first meeting another person. The first one is to watch your attitude.

I discuss how if you have positive mental self-talk prior to meeting another person, it shows all over your body. Then I switch from the positive to the negative and say “on the other hand if your mindset is negative, that is going to show as well.” Just before I say “on the other hand” you can see a micro expression as I pull my mouth sidewise to indicate I am about to go negative. In case you want to view the expression, it occurs at 4:47 into the video.

I had no knowledge of doing this micro expression when I was making the video. It was only upon viewing it that I saw myself telegraphing my change of state from positive to negative. I did not know it, but anyone looking at me would have an indication that I was about to change state

Politicians

Micro expressions are frequent for politicians, and once you know how to read them you can tell when a politician is feeling less confident about what he or she is saying. A good example is John Kasich of Ohio. He has a non-contorted facial expression when he is comfortable, but when he is trying to answer a difficult question he pulls back the corners of his mouth in a micro expression. He will continue to do this roughly every 10 seconds or so as long as the topic makes him nervous.

Donald Trump projects discomfort by increasing his blinking rate whether in a one on one discussion or in a speech. If you just follow the number of times he blinks in a sentence it is easy to spot when he is stretching the truth or making something up. I suspect he is aware of the habit but really has no control over it.

Another interesting pattern with Trump is to watch how he shakes hands. With most people he shakes hands with his palm down, which represents a dominant position. It was interesting to watch his first meeting with Vladimir Putin, because Donald reached across the table with his palm up. This is generally thought to be a submissive gesture that was obvious for all the world to see.

Mitt Romney makes an interesting study in Micro Expressions. In speeches, he is normally quite steady on his feet with excellent eye contact. When the topic gets into the financial areas or taxes, he immediately starts to look down and shifts his weight back and forth. Both of these micro expressions show discomfort.

When gauging the validity of a micro expression, you need to determine if it is just part of a visual tick the person has or if it is actually in response to some thought or input. Just because someone twitches his lip does not necessarily mean he is reacting to something. It may be a personal tick that happens for no detectable reason. Try to observe the ambient body language before ascribing a quick irregular motion as a signal that the person is reacting to a stimulus.

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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