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Jaw and Chin

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Watching how people deal with their jaw and chin can help you understand what they may be thinking. A good example is to watch for clenching of teeth. When a person clenches his teeth, the muscles on both sides of his face bulge out noticeably. This gesture might be accentuated by the jaw muscles getting red.

This gesture is a sign of anger or exasperation. It is like the person is biting on an imaginary silver dollar to keep from blurting out how stupid your last remark was. Sometimes the person clenching his jaw is not even aware he is doing it. I recall one boss I had who used this gesture a lot, and it was always a prime signal to those who were smart to back off.

A dropped jaw is usually a sign of surprise. The person is momentarily incapable of grasping the magnitude of the event going on, so he or she opens the mouth wide while usually giving a verbal equivalent to OMG. The dropped jaw can also be a kind of phony smile where the person is actually showing both his upper and lower teeth at the same time. The gesture is overdone, so it appears insincere.

Another chin gesture is where a person juts his jaw in the direction he wants to direct you. It may be to advise you to listen to another specific person and keep your own mouth shut. This gesture is often accompanied by a slight upward jaw movement.

Stroking of the chin while listening is a gesture that signals the person is contemplating the input or evaluating which option is more palatable. Men tend to use this gesture a lot, especially if they have facial hair.

Thrusting of the chin is a form of aggressive behavior. You can see this gesture if you watch a bully in a school yard. You can also see it in a Corporate Board Room. The connotation is “I am stronger than you, so back off.”

We often speak of the “angle of the chin” as indicative of a person’s mental state. Chin up is a sign of pride. You might hear “She walked out of his office with her head held high and her chin up.” A slight upward angle of the chin is often seen when a person is emoting trust for another person. The connotation is “I am listening and I believe what you are saying.”

The opposite gesture is when a person has his chin down. This is a sign of feeling weak or dejected. It is usually coupled with a lowering of the entire head and gaze of the eyes. This gesture may also be a sign of shame.

Some people move their mouth from side to side with the lips closed. The best interpretation is that the person is evaluating what is going on. It is neither a positive sign nor a negative one. It is like the person is rolling around options in his or her mouth.

An interesting chin move is where a person will repeatedly slap under the chin with the back of his hand. This gesture is trying to make the person doing it more conscious of what is going on. It is a kind of “wake up” move.

A puckered chin is a sign of being protective. It goes along with a lowering of the entire chin area in order to protect the neck region.

Be alert to these chin movements, because they can tell a lot about the person’s mental state. Like all body language signals, you can be more confident you are interpreting it correctly if you see a cluster of signals.

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.

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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