

Body Language 29

Verifying What You See

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Interpreting Body Language accurately is not an exact science. It is more of an art. Since there are numerous conflicting signals, and many of them are culturally specific, it is rather easy to make an incorrect diagnosis of what the other person is feeling or thinking. There is no 100% certain identification of body language signals, but as the number of consistent signals at the same time increases, your chance of getting the right interpretation goes up asymptotically.

What does a cluster look like? Well, suppose I see you sitting in a chair with your hands on the table before you, but you are wringing your hands. In addition, the look on your face is that of a person who is not feeling at all secure. Your forehead is raised and wrinkled and there are some tiny beads of sweat forming. Your posture is rigid and you are shuffling your feet on the floor.

With this set of signals, I can be sure you are anxious about something. The cluster of 6 classic signs of anxiety make the diagnosis rather easy. Just observing any one of the signals, might be an indication of anxiety, but I would need more data to be sure.

How to verify what you see

Depending on the circumstance and your relationship with the other person, you can usually find a way to ask if your observations are correct. It might sound like this: "You seem to be annoyed with your boss today. Am I reading that right?" Such a direct approach might not be the most politic thing with this individual, so you might still notice the body language but soften the inquiry to gather more data.

You might say, "Sometimes I find it hard to read Fred (your boss). He seems to come on strong without having a reason. Have you noticed that?"

Another technique is to make a conscious mental note that something is brewing, but not say anything until you see more signals. In this case, it is critical to stay objective and not talk yourself into seeing things that aren't really there.

You might also ask a third party if he or she has observed some body language that is indicative of a potential problem. If two or three people notice an uncharacteristic set of body language, then the accuracy of interpretation goes up. You must be extremely careful about who you ask and how you do it, lest you become a kind of “political player” who goes around trying to stir up dirt to undermine other people. The test here is to make sure your intent is to be helpful rather than destructive

Changes are most significant

Keep in mind that changes in body language are more significant than consistent behavior. If you know a person well and recognize that he rarely bites his nails, it is a significant sign that he starts biting his nails when the budget is being discussed. Whereas, if the person commonly does that gesture, then you should be more guarded with your observation.

Another example might be a student in the classroom. If she habitually sits holding her head up with her hand, then that is simply her way. But if she never does this, and all of a sudden she starts propping up her chin, you might suspect your lecture is particularly boring or maybe, since other class members are alert, that she was up all night writing her paper. You might call a brief break for the class and have a short chat with her during the break time.

Put body language on the agenda

Simply discussing your observations about body language (as long as you are not obnoxious about it) will serve to make the topic more conscious in your circle of friends or workers. That habit will allow all your friends to become more aware of how to read signals accurately.

Having the skill to interpret body language correctly deepens the understanding within a group and can be an important way to build higher trust between people as long as the ideas are presented in a constructive way. If people begin to feel like they are being psychoanalyzed all the time, you have gone too far. The whole area is a balancing act where just the right amount of analysis is helpful, but going overboard can actually lower trust.

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***

The
TRUST
Ambassador