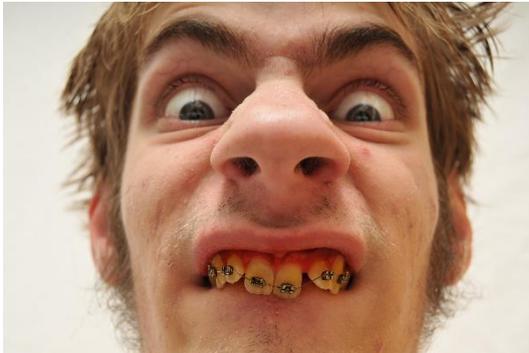


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Proximity

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Have you ever been talking with another person from a different culture and had the distance between both of you cause you to be uncomfortable? It happens all the time to business people who deal with multiple cultures.

If you want to see how uncomfortable proximity can be, take a look at this hilarious two-minute clip of a Seinfeld episode. Just go to Youtube and search on “Close Talker.” It illustrates the issue perfectly.

Proximity rules between cultures

The rules for comfortable proximity are mostly governed by the home country of the people involved. The comfortable distance between you and another person is one thing for you and sometimes very different for the other person. There are some general trends that will help you navigate this sticky part of body language successfully.

According to Sue Bryant in [Country Navigator](#), “Contact cultures – southern European, Latin American and Arabian – engaged in more touching and stood closer during conversation than non-contact cultures in northern Europe, north America and parts of Asia.”

In the USA, most social conversation happens in the range of three to five feet. Conversation at a distance less than 18 inches is considered an invasion of a person’s “intimate” range. The “personal” range is 18-36 inches, while the “social” range is 3 to 12 feet.

Argentina is generally considered the most close proximity culture, whereas USA and Great Britain have more space between individuals when talking.

“Romanians clearly take longer to establish trust; they came out with the widest distance you should stand from a stranger – more than 1.3m – but one of the narrowest gaps for close friends...”

Staking out territory

Most creatures are territorial by nature. I have a bird that drives me crazy by pecking at my window. The bird sees its reflection and thinks it is an intruder. Dogs have a unique way of marking their territory as they raise their leg next to a fire hydrant. Humans are more subtle than animals, but we also have numerous territorial gestures.

You can observe a person sitting on the subway with brief case on the seat on one side and a newspaper on the seat on the other side. The message is “stay away, these seats are taken.”

Think about how you jockey for position when several lanes of traffic compress to just two when entering a tunnel or a tollbooth. How about your behavior at the open buffet or waiting in line at the airport. We all have ways of indicating areas we claim and subtly suggest that others steer clear.

Greeting others

The normal ritual for greeting a person you are just meeting is to use a handshake. It is best to use the right hand only when meeting a person for the first time. Sometimes special situations call for fist bumping or other gestures. A two-handed handshake is fine once you have become acquainted with a person, but it is far too presumptuous when first meeting someone.

Some people like to give a hug or “abrazo” as a cordial way to greet someone they already know. I think it is wise to use caution as the rules on hugging are becoming more restrictive. It is best to hold back until you see the other person extending his or her arms for a hug.

Sending Signals

We constantly send signals to other people about our desires relative to proximity. Normally people are sensitive enough to pick up the signal and act appropriately; however, sometimes people are just clueless as to what is going on. Many an individual has misinterpreted a signal as one to get closer only to be rejected later.

Misunderstandings can happen in any setting: business, social, formal, informal, in public, in private, and even within families. Be alert to the obvious and subtle signals from others about your proximity to them. Doing so can be good for your reputation and enhance your friendships.

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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