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Head Nodding

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



We instinctively nod our head for several reasons. Most of us believe that to nod our head up and down is a signal of agreement, but there is some research that debunks that perception, as I will share. First of all, head nodding is not the same in every culture.

If you are in [Bulgaria](#), nodding your head up and down means “no” and nodding from side to side means “yes,” which is exactly the opposite behavior to that of most cultures. I read that the same is true if you are Inuit, although I cannot recall the reference.

If you notice, some politicians move their head from side to side as they answer questions. I don’t think there is anything sinister about that, but several people have that habit and are probably unaware of it. An example of a person who does that a lot is Hillary Clinton. The difference in interpretation depends on whether the person doing the head movement is speaking or listening. I’ll focus on listening behavior in this article.

In most cultures, nodding of the head means that the listener is awake and paying attention to the content, but we need to use caution before imputing agreement. Bill Acheson, in his excellent DVD [“Advanced Body Language.”](#) pointed to some of his own research that revealed a significant difference between men and women with head nodding while listening.

Most men nod their head to indicate agreement. The message is that “I hear you and agree with your point.” Acheson’s research showed that women head nod far more often than men, and that it is not always to indicate agreement.

For example, Bill points out that many women will nod their head before the man starts to speak. Obviously, they cannot be signaling agreement because no information has been shared yet. The head nod at this point actually is giving the man permission to speak.

Women head nod to indicate they are listening and that they understand what is being conveyed, but they may not be in agreement with the content. A woman can head nod several times, leading a male to believe she is in agreement, when she actually may not agree. The woman may even be giving verbal signals of approval with an occasional “uh huh,” but beware; it may just be an indication of understanding rather than full agreement.

When most people nod their head while listening, it is an indication of attending the conversation. It is a conscious body language signal that indicates understanding. Be careful to confirm agreement in other ways. Nodding does not necessarily mean agreement.

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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