

Body Language 38

A Sour Face

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



There is a facial expression that we all know well. I call it the “sourface.” The look comes from a natural reaction to tasting something that is sour, like a lemon, or milk that has gone bad. We pucker up our mouth, wrinkle our nose, and close our eyes to indicate discomfort.

Children use this expression when they put sour candy in their mouth. It is an instinctual expression that comes naturally, and it is

generally not culture specific.

Physically, when we have something unpleasant in our mouth, we would like to block the taste as much as possible. Taste is a function of breathing along with a chemical reaction on the taste buds. To block the taste, we instinctively try to stop the ability to breathe by crinkling our nose and closing the back of our nostrils.

The eyes close tightly as well, due to the extreme discomfort of tasting something sour. One might think the eyes would widen due to the surprise, but that is never the case. We pucker up our mouth, nose, and eyes at the same time.

In the professional world, we use a similar expression to indicate extreme displeasure. When someone says or does something that is totally offensive to the point of being intolerable, the same facial expression often can be observed. It is like we are saying “dealing with that offensive remark is nearly as impossible as eating a lemon without wincing.” In this case, the tasteless comment is not literal, but the figurative bodily reaction is the same.

When others make a sour face

If you see the expression used in a professional environment, take note of it. In the eyes of that person, what was just said or done went way beyond being wrong or bad: it went all the way to abhorrent. Stop the conversation and try to understand why the person had such a strong reaction. It may have been revulsion at a tasteless joke someone just told. It may be because they witnessed someone playing favorites to a

painful level. It could be that the person believes a decision will likely have catastrophic negative impacts on the culture.

Usually this expression is not a group activity. You will not see everyone on a team use this expression at the same time. It is a manifestation of rejection by the person most offended. The other people are left to deal with the fallout until things get back to normal.

A person who overuses the sourface expression will have a negative impact on any group. People get fed up with the overt attempt to reject most statements. If there a member of your team who uses the sourface gesture a lot, investigate what is behind it.

This individual may be easily offended or have a specific trust problem with one or more members of the team. Alternatively, he or she may not be in sync with the goals or values of the organization. When you see someone using the sourface, use it as a signal that something needs to be discussed with the individual or the team.

When you make a sour face

If you are a leader, remember that it is easy to put your thumb on the scale of group opinion. The sourface may be just an expression you use to signal your personal disapproval, but you are really trying to sway the opinion of the group. Do not use the expression unless it is your intention to communicate a totally intolerable situation.

The sourface is a helpful tool to highlight tentpole issues that should be dealt with before further damage is done. Use it sparingly, and note carefully the reactions from your group. Recognize that the expression might have a negative impact on trust because it is the equivalent of cutting someone off in mid-sentence.

Conclusion

The sourface is an extreme gesture of displeasure when used in a business setting either by a leader or by people in the organization. It should be used only when the situation warrants such an overt signal. More subtle and gentle or verbal means of expressing displeasure normally should be used.

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. TheTrust 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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