

Body Language 39

Rolling Eyes

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



The body language gesture of rolling the eyes is very well known. It normally means a kind of exasperation with what has been said or done. There are several subtle shades of the gesture that are worth noting.

Another word for rolling eyes is “shrugging” the eyes. It is a common form of disapproval or sarcasm.

When done between coworkers at a meeting, it is usually a kind of inside joke where one person is silently mocking a third party to a friend. The idea here is “can you believe this idiot?”

The key point here is that the gesture is not intended to be seen by the object of the comment. It is between the two other people. The secretive nature of the gesture can have a negative effect on the culture of the group. It is similar to talking behind another person’s back.

Children and youth often use the gesture to indicate how clueless they believe their parents are. If you want to have some fun, try rolling your eyes back at a child who uses this gesture. Of course, you risk escalating the matter, but at least for a moment the kid may not know how to respond.

It is like you are mocking the kid for mocking you. The kid is saying “clueless parent” and you respond with “clueless child.”

There is a very slight version of this body language signal that can mean the person is having a hard time understanding a point. This gesture can often take the form of a sideways glance rather than the classic upward look.

Two comedians who used eye rolling effectively were Rodney Dangerfield and Foster Brooks. With Dangerfield, it was often associated with the “no respect” line. Brooks used the gesture as something like incredulous. I recall one roast where Foster was honoring Dean Martin, and he said, “Dean’s dream was to be a great singer.” Then he rolled his eyes, “like that was ever going to happen.”

One effective way to eliminate eye rolling in a professional setting is to call people on it when you catch them. Suppose someone is fond of rolling her eyes in your staff meetings as she sits across the table from a cynical coworker. Simply stop the conversation and address the person rolling her eyes and say, “Are you mocking me?” That puts the person on the spot and will often halt the practice.

Eye rolling is often used during negotiations to indicate that the offer just put on the table has no credibility. A good negotiator will pick just the right moment to use the gesture for maximum impact.

Eye rolling can be fleeting and more like a micro-expression, but the impact can be just as great. As long as the other person sees the gesture, the message has been received.

Eye rolling is often used to express impatience. You might see the gesture in a long line waiting to buy tickets to a show. At one point one person will turn to his partner and roll his eyes to indicate frustrations with the slow movement of the cue.

Try to avoid using the eye roll yourself, especially in a professional setting. It often has a negative connotation and sometimes works to reduce trust within a group. However, the gesture is not always negative. The exact meaning is situational and can be perfectly fine when used between friends as a humorous way to make a point.

When eye rolling is used with sarcasm, it often reduces trust. Mocking other people in public normally creates a negative backlash because it is almost always intended as a put down. If something seems a little over the top, find a verbal way to express your frustration rather than rolling your eyes.

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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