

## **Body Language Gives Away Your Intent**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Brandon was a 22 year old I happened to meet at a Speed Networking event at my local Chamber of Commerce. His ability to connect with me instantly was impressive. Without saying a word, and even before we shook hands, he let me know that he was truly anxious to meet me. It was so powerful that when we did shake hands a second or two later, rather than say "It's nice to meet you," I said, "Congratulations, you are going to be a very wealthy man."

The gift that young man had was an amazing control of the body language he exhibited when we first met. He made great eye contact and showed by his facial expression that he truly wanted to get to know me. It was the kind of expression you see on the face of that one puppy in the pen at the pet shop that just captures your heart instantly.

Our body language gives away what is going on in the back of our mind. It is extremely difficult to hide our pattern of thoughts. It just comes out of every part of our body naturally. I have been studying body language for about 40 years, and there is still a lot to learn. The topic is extremely engaging and insightful. The language we use to communicate with others using facial and body expression is far more complex and intricate than any verbal language is.

We know many of the signals intuitively, but we also miss many important signals that are there but hidden to us. This article is not intended to be an exhaustive treatise on the complexities of body language. Rather it is to recognize the amazing power of being able to read signals and a warning not to rely on body language signals too much.

The truth is that understanding body language correctly requires more than just knowing the particular body positions and their meaning. You can never be certain if a particular kind of body language is a true signal, just a random event, or a misleading gesture. The way to increase the odds of interpreting body language correctly is to study what the different signals mean, then apply the following areas to your interpretation. The five C's will help you interpret body language correctly.

## **1. Context -**

You must consider what is going on around the signal, what happened just before, where the person is located, what else is going on, etc. For example, if I am talking with you and I scratch my nose, it probably means I have an itch on my nose. But, if I am on the witness stand and have not touched my nose for an hour, it is a different context. When the prosecutor asks me about the bloody knife, and my finger goes to the side of my nose as I answer the question, that is a strong indication that I am lying or at least exaggerating.

## **2. Clusters**

Since there are many body language signals going on with each person at any given time, you should not ascribe heavy meaning to any single one. Instead, look for patterns or clusters. I can witness you rubbing your palms, rapid blinking, hair on arms standing out, foot movement, heavy swallowing, and shifting of weight. I might also notice more perspiration than normal. With a cluster of signals like these, I can be certain you are experiencing anxiety.

## **3. Congruence**

If your words, your tone of voice, and your body language are telling me the same thing, chances are I am getting a true signal. When you are saying one thing, but your body language shows a different pattern, I need to be alert that you may be trying to deceive me in some way. I need to be vigilant and test more for congruence. If there are several indications of incongruence, it could signal that you are not telling me the full truth.

## **4. Consistency**

Look for patterns in people's behavior. If a student in one of my classes habitually likes to sit with her arms folded because that is a comfortable position for her, then that is a baseline. I should not think it is a signal when she folds her arms. For another person who rarely folds his arms, if I notice he does so immediately after making a statement about his boss, I might suspect he is being defensive and look for other signals to corroborate the suspicion.

## **5. Culture**

People tend to forget that cultural differences in body language are huge. For example, if you are an Eskimo, moving your head up and down means "no," while shaking your head from side to side means "yes." An obvious difference in culture is the issue of proximity. When talking with a person from a middle eastern culture, expect the gap between you and the other person to be significantly less than when addressing a person from a western culture.

Correct interpretation of body language needs to factor in these five areas. Taking these things into account allows us to be more accurate when we read meaning to body language. Become a student of body language yourself. You will find it is a vital skill, and the more you develop it the more you will improve both your ability to understand the intentions of others but also send more consistent signals yourself.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. 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](http://www.Leadergrow.com), [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585.392.7763

New Book in 2014 - *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* For more information go to [www.astd.org/transition](http://www.astd.org/transition)

