

Successful Supervisor Part 37

Mastering Body Language

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The topic of Body Language has fascinated me for decades. There is no way to cover the topic completely in a short blog article, but I can give some tips that may help supervisors know how to prevent misreading BL and how to control their own so the message they are sending with their body is consistent with their verbal message. I will also share some resources at the end in case this brief introduction whets the appetite for further study.

Body language points us in the direction of what people are feeling, but it is not an exact science. A person could make a gesture that is a random act or something not indicative of the classical meaning. For example, if a person touches the side of his nose when giving a response, the experts would say that he is lying or exaggerating. Alternatively, it could simply mean that he had an itchy nose at that moment.

Taking singular pieces of body language and assigning specific meaning can result in some wrong conclusions. So how do we know which things are the real meaning? In interpreting body language, keep the following five “C’s” in mind, and you will improve your accuracy at reading people.

1. Context

Pay attention to what is going on around the person. Body language is contextual and can vary greatly due to ambient conditions. Folded arms at a cocktail party might suggest the person is being defensive, but folded arms in a snow storm is more likely to be the result of the person being cold.

2. Congruence

Do the words and body language match? If we are faced with two signals, one from the words that are spoken and another from the body language, then we will likely believe the latter. For example, if I ask a coworker if he is angry with me and he glares at me with a scowl and clenches his fists while he says “NO!” I am most likely to believe he is angry with me, even though what he said denied it.

3. Clusters

If we see a single bit of body language, we might suspect that it is an indication of something, but it is hard to tell. However, if I see an individual exhibit several signals of a particular body language cue, then I can be very sure of the conclusion. For example, if a person is wringing his hands and shuffling his feet while wrinkling his forehead and not maintaining eye contact, I can be pretty sure the person is feeling anxious.

4. Consistency

We all have habitual patterns of body language that we revert to when nothing special is going on. While you are sitting in a classroom or in church, you will habitually cross your legs in a certain way or touch your face in a certain spot. It is best to not interpret body language that is habitual as some kind of signal, but if the habitual position changes, especially as a result of some comment or other stimulus, then the change in body language is probably a signal. For example, if a person is listening to me and suddenly starts pulling on his ear lobe as I shift the conversation to the new employee, he is likely showing high interest in what I am saying.

5. Culture

Body language and proximity (which is a part of BL) vary greatly from one region of a country to another and even more so from one country to another. If I am a USA-based business person and I am doing some work with a person from Saudi Arabia, I may find that he stands a little too close for my comfort level. Likewise if I meet an Eskimo, I might interpret his head shaking side to side as a “no” response, when he is actually telling me “yes.”

Beyond these five general rules, there are thousands of facial expressions and other cues relative to body language. The more you know these cues the better off you will be at interpreting their meaning accurately.

A few of my favorite resources:

1. A very old book, but still available is [“How to Read a Person Like a Book”](#) by Nierenberg.
2. A great online [test of your ability to read facial expressions](#) accurately.
3. Online resource [Body Language Dictionary](#)
4. A [DVD of Bill Acheson](#); a body language expert from University of Pittsburgh

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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