



Body Language

Understanding Non-Verbal Communication

Have you ever been in the situation when you really didn't believe what someone was saying? Did you have a sense that something didn't ring true or a gut feeling that all was not right? Perhaps they were saying 'Yes' yet their heads were shaking 'No'?

The difference between the words people speak and our understanding of what they are saying comes from non-verbal communication, otherwise known as "body language". By developing your awareness of the signs and signals of body language, you can more easily understand other people, and more effectively communicate with them.

There are sometimes subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – movements, gestures, facial expressions and even shifts in our whole bodies that indicate something is going on. The way we talk, walk, sit and stand all say something about us, and whatever is happening on the inside can be reflected on the outside.

By becoming more aware of this body language and understanding what it might mean, you can learn to read people more easily. This puts you in a better position to communicate effectively with them. What's more, by increasing your understanding of others, you can also become more aware of the messages that you convey to them.

There are times when we send mixed messages – we say one thing yet our body language reveals something different. This non-verbal language will affect how we act and react to others, and how they react to us.

This article will explain many of the ways in which we communicate non-verbally, so that you can use these signs and signals to communicate more effectively.

First impressions and confidence

Recall a time when you met someone new at work. Or think about the last time you watched a speaker deliver a presentation.

What were your first impressions? Did you sense confidence or a lack of confidence in them? Did you want to associate with them or not? Were you convinced by them?

Did they stride into the room, engage you and maintain eye contact or were they tentative, shuffling towards you with eyes averted, before sliding into a chair? What about their handshake – firm and strong or weak and limp?

Moving along in the conversation, did they maintain solid eye contact or were they frequently looking away? Did their face appear relaxed or was it tight and tense? What about their hand and arm movements? Were their gestures wide, flowing and open or were they tight, jerky and closed?

As you observe others, you can identify some common signs and signals that give away whether they are feeling confident or not. Typical things to look for in confident people include:

- **Posture** – standing tall with shoulders back.
- **Eye contact** – solid with a 'smiling' face.
- **Gestures with hands and arms** – purposeful and deliberate.
- **Speech** – slow and clear.
- **Tone of voice** – moderate to low.

As well as deciphering other people's body language, you can use this knowledge to convey feelings that you're not actually experiencing.

For example, if you are about to enter into a situation where you are not as confident as you'd like to be, such as giving a big presentation or attending an important meeting, you can adopt these 'confidence' signs and signals to project confidence.

Let's now look at another scenario.

Difficult meetings and defensiveness

Think of a time when you were in a difficult meeting – perhaps a performance appraisal or one where you are negotiating deadlines, responsibilities or a contract. In an ideal world, both you and the other person would be open and receptive to hearing what each other has to say, in order to conclude the meeting successfully.

However, often, the other person is defensive and doesn't really listen. If this happens during an appraisal meeting, and it's important for you to convey to your colleague that he or she needs to change certain behaviors, you really want them open and receptive to you so they take on board what you are saying.

So how can you tell whether your message is falling on "deaf ears"?

Some of the common signs that the person you are speaking with may be feeling defensive include:

- Hand/arm gestures are small and close to his or her body.
- Facial expressions are minimal.
- Body is physically turned away from you.
- Arms are crossed in front of body.
- Eyes maintain little contact, or are downcast.

By picking up these signs, you can change what you say or how you say it to help the other person become more at ease, and more receptive to what you are saying.

Equally, if you are feeling somewhat defensive going into a negotiating situation, you can monitor your own body language to ensure that the messages you are conveying are ones that say that you are open and receptive to what is being discussed.

Working with groups and disengagement

Have you ever delivered a presentation, and had a sense that people weren't really buying into what you had to say? What about working with a group to facilitate a consensus on responsibilities and deadlines? Was everyone on board with the ideas, or did some appear disengaged?

Ideally, when you stand up to deliver a presentation or work with group, you want 100% engagement with all concerned. This often doesn't happen on its own, though. But you can actively engage the audience when you need to if you're alert to some of the typical signs and signals of people not being engaged. Some of these signs and signals include:

- Heads are down.
- Eyes are glazed, or gazing at something else.
- Hands may be picking at cloths, or fiddling with pens.
- People may be writing or doodling.
- They may be sitting slumped in their chairs.

When you pick up that someone appears not to be engaged in what is going on, you can do something to re-engage him or her and bring their focus back to what you are saying, such as asking them a direct question.

And while this is going on, make sure that your own body language is saying what you want it to.

Lying

Of all the non-verbal body language that we may observe, being able to tell whether a person is lying or not will stand you in good stead.

Some of the typical signs and signals that a person is lying include:

- Eyes maintain little or no eye contact, or there may be rapid eye movements, with pupils constricted.
- Hand or fingers are in front of his or her mouth when speaking.
- His or her body is physically turned away from you, or there are unusual/un-natural body gestures.
- His or her breathing rate increases.
- Complexion changes such as in color; red in face or neck area.
- Perspiration increases.
- Voice changes such as change in pitch, stammering, throat clearing.

As with all non-verbal language, it's important to remember here that everyone's personal body language is slightly different. If you notice some of the typical non-verbal signs of lying, you shouldn't necessarily jump to conclusions, as many of these signals can be confused with the appearance of nervousness. What you should do, however, is use these signals as a prompt to probe further, ask more questions and explore the area in more detail to determine whether they are being truthful or not.

Further clarification is always worthwhile when checking out your understanding of someone's body language, and this is particularly true during job interviews and in negotiating situations.

Interviews and negotiations, and reflection

What do you do when you are asked a really good question? Do you ponder for a few moments before answering?

You might simply blurt something out without taking time to think about the answer, or you could take a moment to reflect before answering. By taking some time to reflect on your response, you are indicating to the questioner that they've asked you a good question and it is important enough for you to take some time to consider your answer.

Be that in an interview situation or when negotiating something with someone, showing that you are indeed thinking over your answer is a positive thing. Some typical signs and signals that a person is reflecting on their answer include:

- Eyes look away and return to engage contact only when answering.
- Finger stroking on chin.
- Hand to cheek.
- Head tilted with eyes looking up.

So, whether you are on the receiving end of someone pondering, or you are doing the pondering, there are certain gestures that give it away.

One size does NOT fit all

We mentioned earlier that each person is unique, and that their signs and signals might have a different underlying cause from the ones you suspect. This is often the case when people have different past experiences, and particularly where cultural differences are large. This is why it's important to check that your interpretation of someone else's body language is correct. You might do this through the use of further questions, or simply by getting to know the person better.

To help practice and further develop your skill in picking up body language, engage in people-watching. Observe people – be that on a bus/train or on television without the sound – and just notice how they act and react to each other. When you watch others, try to guess what they are saying or get a sense of what is going on between them.

Even if you do not get the chance to check whether you are correct in your assessment, you will be developing your observational skills. This in turn can help you to pick up signals when you are interacting with others.

Tip:

As well as learning to read body language, people often consciously use it to project messages and reinforce what they're saying – we can all call to mind the body language used by a "slippery" used-car salesman.

Whether or not this is acceptable depends on the situation. It's fine to put on a "brave face" when you're about to meet someone or do a presentation. However, it's not acceptable if you're trying to persuade someone to do something that's against their interests – what's more, the gestures you can't control may give you away, leading to a serious loss of trust and credibility.

Key Points

Body language impacts a great deal of how we communicate, and can reflect quite accurately what's going on inside us.

Body language includes body movements and gestures (legs, arms, hands, head and torso), posture, muscle tension, eye contact, skin coloring (flushed red), even people's breathing rate and perspiration. Additionally, the tone of voice, the rate of speech and the pitch of the voice all add to the words that are being used.

It is important to recognize that body language may vary between individuals, and between different cultures and nationalities. It is therefore essential to verify and confirm the signals that you are reading, by questioning the individual and getting to know the person.

This site teaches you the skills you need for a happy and successful career; and this is just one of many tools and resources that you'll find [here at Mind Tools](#). Click [here](#) for more, subscribe to our [free newsletter](#), or [become a member](#) for just \$1.
