**Body Language in Negotiation: How Facial Expressions Impact a Negotiation**

**Building trust and rapport in negotiation using body language**

**By** [**PON Staff**](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/author/pon_staff/) **— on September 24th, 2018 /** [**Daily**](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/category/daily/)**,** [**Negotiation Skills**](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/category/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/)

When we’re deciding whether to trust a counterpart, his facial expressions matter a great deal, suggests a study by [negotiation researchers](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/conflict-resolution/how-nervous-energy-affects-negotiation-and-conflict-management/) Jeroen Stouten of the University of Leuven, Belgium, and David De Cremer of the Rotterdam School of Management, the Netherlands.

In one experiment, Stouten and De Cremer asked undergraduate participants to play an economic game that involved deciding how much to gamble on an [opponent’s trustworthiness](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/six-strategies-for-building-trust-in-negotiations/). A participant who took the biggest gamble possible would earn 10 euros if her opponent was trustworthy but would earn nothing if the opponent was untrustworthy. Some participants were shown a picture of a smiling opponent, and others were shown a frowning, angry-looking opponent. (The same person was depicted in both pictures, and unbeknownst to the participants, they were simply playing against a computer.) Some of the participants read a message in which their opponent (either smiling or frowning) stated that he wanted to cooperate in the upcoming game. Other participants read a message in which the same smiling or frowning opponent said he wanted to claim as much as he could for himself.

The results showed that participants viewed the “happy” opponent to be more honest, reliable, and trustworthy than the “angry” opponent, regardless of his message. As a result of this trust, the participants relied more on the happy opponent’s message than they did on the angry opponent’s message when deciding how much to gamble in the game that followed. Interestingly, even though they didn’t trust the angry opponent, participants made relatively high offers to him whether or not he was cooperative, perhaps because they found him intimidating.

Not surprisingly, we are more likely to trust the statements of someone who seems happy than those of someone who seems angry. Because smiles and frowns are an imperfect means of judging someone’s true [emotions](http://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/conflict-resolution/emotion-and-judgment/), let alone her trustworthiness, it’s smart to be attuned to this potential bias. In addition, beware the common tendency to concede too much to those who appear (but may not actually be) angry or stern.