**How Body Language Affects Negotiation**

**Research on how body language affects negotiation reveals strategies we can adopt to ensure that our interpersonal communications are clear—and to minimize the possibility of being deceived.**

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Experts typically advise us to study our counterparts’ [body language in negotiation](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/leadership-skills-daily/women-and-negotiation-permission-to-skip-the-chit-chat/) and to be aware of our own body language. What, exactly, can we learn from others’ nonverbal behavior? And how can we modify our own nonverbal behavior to increase our negotiation success? We analyze three scenarios to help you understand how body language affects negotiation.

1. **To Mimic or Not to Mimic?**

***A corporate headhunter welcomes you into a conference room, and the two of you settle across from each other at a table. Twenty minutes later, the interview seems to be going very well. You happen to notice that you and the recruiter are both leaning back with your legs crossed. Feeling self-conscious, you wonder if you should shift position.***

After being in each other’s presence for just a few minutes, people’s behavior begins to subtly converge: Their breathing patterns and heart rates sync up, and they also tend to mimic each other’s posture and hand gestures.

Rather than feeling embarrassed by such copycat behavior, congratulate yourself: Mimicry is a sign that you’re striving to build rapport, connect, and find common ground. Mimicry seems to make us feel comfortable with others and more trusting of them. Regarding how body language affects negotiation, professor Tanya Chartrand of Duke University has found that we tend to view those who mimic our movements as more persuasive and honest than those who do not.

1. **Should You Trust or Not?**

***Christian Karl Gerharts­reiter, a German, successfully passed himself off as a member of the Rockefeller family for many years while living in the United States. Gerhartsreiter conned his way into marriages and high-level jobs in investment firms, writes the* Boston Globe, *despite an obvious lack of experience and credentials, before being arrested for allegedly kidnapping his daughter.***

Research shows that most of us tend to automatically trust those we meet—and adjust our perceptions only in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Evaluating a negotiator’s trustworthiness may be especially difficult in [intercultural negotiation](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/international-negotiation-daily/intercultural-negotiation-does-the-batna-concept-translate/). Regardless of the culture, it helps to remember that some nonverbal signs are more important than others. Professor Maurice E. Schweitzer of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania notes that liars sometimes have trouble matching their facial expressions to the emotion they’re communicating. A liar might have difficulty coordinating her behavior—saying no while nodding yes, for example. Liars also sometimes forget to add the gestures, pitch variations, raised eyebrows, and widened eyes that we make naturally when telling the truth.

But don’t count on nonverbal signs exclusively when assessing [deceptive tactics in negotiation](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/deceptive-tactics-in-negotiation-how-to-ward-them-off/). To smoke out a lie, ask lots of specific, clear questions about someone’s claims, recommends Harvard Business School professor Max H. Bazerman. Try asking different versions of the same question at several points in your conversation, and compare the consistency of the responses.

1. **Can They Read Your Mind?**

***An attorney is looking forward to representing his client’s strong case in court. The client is anxious, and his questions sometimes irritate the attorney. She’s worried the client will pick up on her underlying impatience through her nonverbal behavior.***

Most negotiators have faced the challenge of smiling through gritted teeth. We all understand the value of being friendly and patient while focusing on our goals, but it’s sometimes difficult to keep our true feelings under wraps.

How skilled are we at communicating emotions that don’t quite match our true feelings? Professor Paul Ekman of the University of California Medical School, San Francisco, has identified “micro-expressions”—fleeting, involuntary signs of one’s genuine emotions, such as a blush or a grimace—that might tip others off to our thoughts. But such micro-expressions can be all but impossible for anyone but a trained researcher to detect.

In one experiment, Stephen Porter and Leanne ten Brinke of Dalhousie University asked participants to respond to a series of emotionally charged or neutral images, either genuinely or with false emotions. Those asked to be deceptive displayed inconsistent facial expressions and blinked more often than those who reacted genuinely. Participants had more trouble falsifying negative emotions than positive ones; it seems happiness may be easier to fake than sadness or fear. Yet untrained observers detected the deception at a rate only slightly better than chance.

When it comes to how body language affects negotiation, you may have trouble hiding your feelings, but others may be even worse at detecting them. Rest assured that most people will take your social niceties at face value. At the same time, to maximize the benefits of negotiation in business, practice expressing difficult sentiments in a constructive, sensitive manner. The [importance of body language in negotiation](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/negotiation-techniques-and-body-language-body-language-negotiation-examples-in-real-life/) is undeniable—but sometimes words do speak louder than actions.