

# Understanding Nonverbal Communication

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The majority of what we learn about human behavior isn't spoken; it's conveyed by nonverbal signals. Being able to understand and use this powerful but subtle form of communication will steer you through delicate political situations and help you shape personal relationships. It will also make it easier to deal with difficult people.

Nonverbal communication involves many different "channels" that convey meaning beyond what's being said. These include gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and even vocal tone and pitch. Much of the nonverbal information we get from people comes from their eyes. This explains why it's often hard to infer meaning from a telephone call or written words.

Since nonverbal communication—or *body language*—is such a natural part of our communication toolkit, learning to interpret it can greatly improve your relationships and your understanding of other people. Still, it's an art to be treated with a degree of caution. Misinterpretation, especially when dealing in a highly politicized organization, can have ghastly consequences.

## What You Need to Know

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### How can I tell when someone is bluffing?

When people are speaking in honest, straightforward fashion their nonverbal actions usually are consistent with their words. They say, "Look over there!" and reinforce the message by pointing simultaneously towards the focus of attention. Or, they'll admit, "I'm unhappy about that," and their face and body droop, too. When people are bluffing, though, their gestures usually are inconsistent with their speech. One may say, "It's almost a done deal!" yet you notice a nervous body pattern—the shifting of feet or the tapping of fingers. Unusual aversion to eye contact or the blinking of eyes also can expose an inconsistency. Communication experts call this *leakage*.

### How can I tell, from body language, when a person is getting angry? What can I do?

Tone of voice, subtle changes in facial expression, and gestures head the list of clues. For example, someone will start pacing up and down or rapping the table—pleasantly smiling all the while to hide true but socially unacceptable feelings. Your reaction to increased anger depends on the situation and your personality. You can choose to try to calm things down by demonstrating that you're actively listening to the other person's frustrations and by asking open-ended questions to encourage dialogue. Or you may prefer to back off until the heat dies down; if so, analyze what happened and how you reacted. If you think you have contributed to the person's anger, consider how you might do

things differently next time. You may want to revisit the incident with the person later to work together on a way to communicate more effectively in the future.

## How do people behave when they're not telling the truth?

There are a number of gestures that betray lying. Most have to do with hiding the mouth with a hand. Other gestures include touching one's nose or running a finger along the inside of a collar. Avoiding eye contact is another sign, especially if a previously "normal" eye-contact pattern shifts suddenly to darting or averted gazes. Or, if the pace of blinking picks up appreciably, there may be more than a speck of dust causing it!

## What to Do

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### Understand the Meanings Of Gestures

The six most universal human emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, envy, fear and love—are seen on faces around the world. Smiles and scowls almost universally convey happiness and anger. Other common gestures include the "I don't know" shrug, the "yes" nod, and the side-to-side head shake that says "no"; but be careful: gestures that we may think are universal actually convey different messages in difficult cultures. For example, the thumbs up and joined forefinger/thumb are well-established signs for "OK" in the U.S. and United Kingdom, just as raising one's first two fingers means "Victory." In other cultures, though, both gestures have offensive meanings.

Many gestures come in "clusters." If you study people during a meeting, you're likely to see the following body movements:

- Hands—a person may signal that he is evaluating what's being said by balancing his chin on his thumb with his middle finger running along his bottom lip and his index finger pointing up his cheek
- Limbs—one arm may be clamped against the body by the other elbow
- Bodies—if a person's torso is leaning back from a vertical position, he or she is signaling distance from what's being said

This cluster of nonverbal gestures indicates that a listener is reserving judgment about what's being said. Other clusters suggest other feelings. If you sense that a cluster of gestures is conveying someone's true thoughts, ask that person to share them verbally.

## Match and Mirror When Appropriate

If you watch two people talking in a relaxed manner, you may notice their bodies taking on a similar posture. Both may cross their legs or settle into their chairs in similar ways. If they're eating or drinking, they may do so at the same rate. This is called *matching* or *mirroring*, and it occurs naturally between two people who feel they're on the same wavelength. Matching and mirroring can be used consciously as a technique to achieve rapport with someone, but it needs to be done subtly. Exaggerated mirroring looks like mimicry, and the other person is likely to feel embarrassed or angry.

Watch your counterparts' body language carefully; then reflect the pattern of their nonverbal communication. When this feels natural, see if you can take the lead: Change *your* body position, then see if they follow you. Very often they do. Once you begin feeling comfortable with this process, try using it in a problematic situation.

## Think About Eyes

Most individuals conveying nonverbal facial signals rely on their eyes. Good eye contact is an effective way of building rapport. Not only can you "read" another person's disposition, you can also convey, very subtly, messages that will reinforce what you're saying.

However, too much eye contact can be intrusive or too intimate. Those who do not want to be exposed in this way may use techniques to break or block eye contact. Celebrities wear sunglasses; obviously we can't do that in a business context! Instead we may use eye movements such as the "over-the-shoulder stare" or the long, fluttery, blink that effectively draws down the shutters.

In business settings, it's important to confine your gaze to the eyes and forehead and forego the more intimate glance at the lips or upper body. If you hold your stare for too long, it may be considered hostile, so try to limit it to two thirds of the conversation. If you reduce the timing to less than one third, you may appear timid or shifty.

## Listen Actively

Active listening is a rare skill, but it's well worth mastering. It's effective in helping you build rapport with people and avoiding the kind of misunderstandings that land you in awkward situations. It can also yield valuable information that enables one to do his job more efficiently.

Demonstrate that you've understood and are interested in what's being said in conversation. This kind of active listening requires good eye contact, lots of head nods, and responses such as "Ah," or "I understand what you mean." You can also summarize what has been said to demonstrate your understanding and ask open-ended questions such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" and "What

do you think should be done?" These questions encourage further communication and enrich what's being said.

## Think About the Significance of Props and Seating

Many people use props to reinforce their messages, the most common being extensions of the hand such as fingers, pen, pointer, or even a pair of glasses. (Some people also like to button or unbutton their jackets). Using a prop extends the space the body takes up and helps convey the person as being more confident and powerful.

Adjusting a tie, fussing with the hair, or tugging at a cuff are examples of "preening." People often use these gestures to endear themselves to others, although they also can suggest nervousness. Clenching coffee cups or wine glasses close to the body allows them to be used as defense mechanisms. They effectively close off the more vulnerable parts of the body.

The way people sit in a group can convey powerful messages about the pecking order. Taking the chair at the head of the table automatically puts someone in the controlling position. Leaning back with arms behind the head and one leg crossed horizontally across the other conveys feelings of superiority. A closed or crunched body position can mean disapproval, defensiveness, or a lack of interest.

## Respect Boundaries

People travel through the world enclosed within a conceptual zone of personal space and feel invaded if others trespass into it. They often protect this territory by placing a desk between themselves and others, by standing behind a chair or counter, or by clinging to an object like a handbag or briefcase as if it were a shield.

It's always interesting to watch people in groups. If you see two or three men talking, you might notice them shift their weight from one foot to the other. This is part of a ritual of creating territorial boundaries. They might also make themselves appear taller by rocking forward onto the balls of their feet to indicate power and confidence. When women are in groups, they're much more likely to mirror each other's nonverbal behavior in an attempt to build lateral bridges.

That's why it's essential to place any body-watching observations *in context*, because most nonverbal communication is part of a broader dialogue.

## **Interpret Body Language in Context**

Much has been written about how to read body language and the insights it provides. As you read, though, always remember to place your interpretation in context. For example, someone sitting in a meeting with his or her arms crossed could be expressing aggression, reluctance, or disapproval, but the person also could simply be shy, cold, or ill. So be cautious of jumping to conclusions about how someone feels without more information.

If you move to a new environment, it may have a different political mentality, so there could be a risk of misunderstanding the gestures you observe. Perhaps your new boss is more emotional than your old one and expects a more energetic display of enthusiasm for the job. So take time to observe what's going on around you first, and note how the different context makes you feel. You also could seek advice from someone more familiar with the new culture to gain an understanding of what certain nonverbal communications mean.

## **Look For Consistency**

In order for nonverbal communication to work for you, all the nonverbal channels of communication must reinforce the message you're trying to convey. If you notice side-to-side head-shaking while someone is saying, "I agree wholeheartedly with this decision," you're seeing an example of incongruence; the person's words say one thing, but the body language says exactly the opposite. Individuals come across as inauthentic when one or more of their channels of communication are conveying contradictory messages.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You're Not Subtle**

People new to the techniques of nonverbal communication can be overly enthusiastic practitioners. Be objective about your own observations to make sure you aren't offending others by broadly mimicking their speech or behavior. Remember, most people instinctively send and interpret nonverbal signals all the time, so don't assume you're the only one who's aware of nonverbal undercurrents. Finally, stay true to yourself. Be aware of your own natural style, and don't adopt behavior that is incompatible with it.

## You Bluff

Thinking you can bluff by deliberately altering your body language can do more harm than good. Unless you're a proficient actor, it will be hard to overcome your body's inability to lie. There will always be mixed messages, signs that your channels of communication are not congruent. It's a prime example of *leakage*, and something others will detect, one way or another.

## You Ignore Context

Putting too much stock in someone's nonverbal signals can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings. It's important to understand the context in which the signals are being transmitted.

## You Rush To Accuse Based On Body Language Alone

Incorrect accusations based on erroneous observations can be embarrassing and damaging and take a long time to overcome. Always verify your interpretation with another communications channel before rushing in. You could say something like, "I get the feeling you're uncomfortable with this course of action. Would you like to add something to the discussion?" This should draw out the real message and force the individual to come clean or to adjust his or her body language.

## Where to Learn More

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### Book:

Philippot, Pierre, Robert S. Feldman, Erik J. Coats (editors). *The Social Context of Nonverbal Behavior*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

### Web Sites:

Nonverbal Behavior, Nonverbal Communication Links: [www.usal.es/~nonverbal/varios.htm](http://www.usal.es/~nonverbal/varios.htm)

Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs, and Body Language:  
<http://members.aol.com/nonverbal2/diction1.htm>

Rider University: [www.rider.edu/users/suler/bodylang.html](http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/bodylang.html)

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