

Understanding Body Language for Better Business Results

Body language can be defined as the visual messages people transmit through mannerisms, posture, facial expressions and other contortions of the human body. Most instances of body language are unintended, meaning that the individual is unaware that he or she is sending a message. In rare occasions an individual will knowingly use body language to relay a message that may be uncomfortable to express verbally. In both cases the validity of the message and the integrity of the message are the same.

Understanding body language can be a useful tool in business, not necessarily in terms of understanding the hidden meanings behind the actions of others, but rather by gaining a better understanding of how your body language serves to promote or injure your chances of achieving your objectives.

Generally, body language is not as good an indication as most people believe. It is hard to predict with any certainty what a particular gesture or posture really means. What we can do is gain some understanding of the perceptions of others and use this perception to influence our behavior so that we have a more controlled message. For example, during negotiations some people are inclined to sit in a relaxed manner, while others tend to sit more upright. Can we genuinely infer from this that the relaxed negotiator has less to worry about, or maybe is less tied to the deal? We can only conclude that some people prefer to sit upright, while others enjoy leaning back. However, we do know that others may read a relaxed position as a more carefree posture, and we can use that knowledge to our benefit.

In body language three elements of perception are important. They are:

1. Context
2. Sequence
3. Time

By context it is meant that the situation itself lends to how a specific action should be viewed. Certainly sitting upright in a dental chair has different meaning than sitting upright at a negotiation table. So too, does crossing ones arms when lying on a beach, as opposed to crossing ones arms when speaking to a supervisor.

By sequence it is meant that situations are a continuum of activity and a more accurate understanding of body language can be gained by viewing a person's behavior in its entirety and not one specific action in isolation. For example, if during negotiations a person is sitting in a relaxed manner and suddenly sits upright when a specific issue is raised, it can safely be assumed that the specific issue is of particular importance to the individual. Conversely, if the person is sitting upright and suddenly leans back, it could mean a variety of things, from the issue under discussion is less important to simple fatigue.

Time is an interesting perceptive devise because we often view time as an indication of intent. For example, when business meetings are over "too quickly" we perceive a negative experience, when in fact it could be that the meeting went so well the other

party saw no reason to continue – they were sold and simply wanted to move on to their next order of business. So too, when meetings drag on, we get the sense of a lack of commitment or an inability to make a decision, when in fact it could mean that one party is simply engaging in a process that will enable them to make a decision.

Understanding body language – both yours and others – requires that you remain completely aware of your behavior and focused on your objectives and the manner in which you wish to appear as you pursue them. By understanding how you “come off” to others, you can manipulate your behavior to suit your strategy and gain benefit.