

Body Language

What is body language?

It has been suggested that when we communicate, the meaning is perceived as follows:

7% by the words	38% by the tone of voice	55% by the body language
------------------------	---------------------------------	---------------------------------

So what is this body language that's so important? Body language is a term used to describe the combination of gestures, posture, and expressions that 'set the scene' for anything you may be saying.

For example if you are asking your team to get behind a recent change to working practices and give it their best shot, you need to come across as enthusiastic yourself. This will involve using the appropriate body language and tone of voice, as well as choosing the right words. It will have the opposite effect if you appear to be unenthusiastic about the change, your team are not likely to be keen themselves.

Components of body language

The components that make up body may be divided into 3 main areas as shown, with some examples taken in the context of a conversation:

Head & face

- ❑ **Eye contact** – generally positive, although when eye contact continues and becomes staring it may be interpreted as aggressive.
- ❑ **Smiling** – generally positive although it needs to be genuine, a brief smile that never reaches the eyes will seem insincere.
- ❑ **Frowning** – generally indicates disagreement or disbelief, may show that the listener does not understand
- ❑ **Nodding** – generally agreement, or a symptom of active listening
- ❑ **Shaking the head** – generally disagreement, may be showing agreement that something is unbelievable
- ❑ **Raised eyebrows** – may indicate surprise or disbelief

Hands

- ❑ **Rubbing the nose, ear or collar** may indicate that a person feels under pressure and may be less than truthful
- ❑ **Steepling the fingers** may indicate judgement
- ❑ **Tapping the fingers** usually shows impatience, either to say something or to end a discussion
- ❑ **A hand over the mouth** may indicate an untruth
- ❑ **Resting the chin on a hand** can also indicate judgement
- ❑ **Playing with hair** can show a lack of concentration
- ❑ **A jabbing finger** will usually be seen as aggressive
- ❑ **Straightening the tie** can often indicates a mental 'pull yourself together'
- ❑ **Palms up gestures** are often seen as speaking the truth

Body & legs

- ❑ **Folding the arms** may show a barrier or rejection – but may just feel comfortable! If however they are wrapped tightly around the body it may indicate uncertainty or a need for self-protection
- ❑ **Standing with hands on hips** will be seen as aggressive in most situations
- ❑ **Sitting with the hands behind the head** may be seen as aggressive or a 'power play'
- ❑ **Leaning towards someone** generally shows interest whereas leaning away from them may indicate not wanting to be involved
- ❑ **Sitting slumped with the head down** will usually indicate boredom
- ❑ **Twining the legs around each other** may indicate unease or tension, or a need to protect yourself
- ❑ **Swinging the feet** may show impatience or boredom

General

Generally, open gestures can be considered as positive, whereas closed gestures may be considered to be negative. However, if you are dealing with someone from a different country, bear in mind that different components may mean different things in that culture, for instance some cultures regard eye contact as challenging. There are also several examples of hand signals that mean one thing in some countries and something quite different in others!

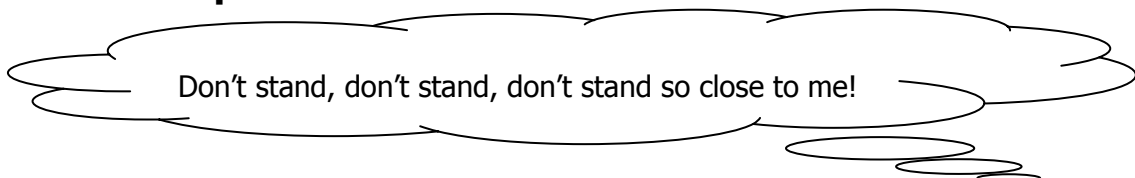
Combining components

Most of the components in the lists above are described as 'may show...' or 'generally...'. One of these components on its own should not be taken to indicate anything, but several together may give an indication of the other party's feelings. For example, a person may rub their nose because they have an itch, but if they also rub their collar and ear and cover their mouth while they speak, they may be about to be economical with the truth! The meaning of such combinations of gestures may need to be checked out dependant on the context, for instance if during a conversation the other person does as described in this example you might want to ask 'Are you sure that's right?'

False components

A person may be aware of the body language they are showing, and try to correct it. Although this can be done successfully, there may be odd components that don't match the general picture they are portraying. This may indicate that a person is trying to use body language deliberately to give an impression of – for example - strength while not feeling confident in their position. It is therefore generally unwise to try to send out false messages through, for example, your posture, as the components of other body language will give you away sooner or later. If you wish to show enthusiasm, as in the example at the beginning, the best way is to be enthusiastic!

Personal space



Positioning yourself too far from the other person distances you from the conversation and sets up communication barriers, whereas positioning yourself too close invades that person's personal space, and you will find that they will back away. This changes with the situation, for example, we stand close to total strangers in a crowded train or a queue without too much concern, but if we chose to stand that close to a stranger in a large unoccupied room, they would feel threatened.

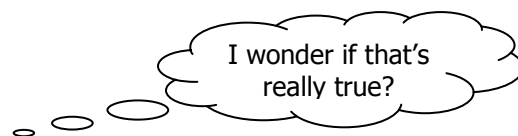
Seating arrangements

Although not strictly part of body language, seating arrangements are a development of some of the ideas above. Sitting or standing face to face is confrontational for most people; it feels preferable to sit or stand at right angles to the person with whom you are communicating. Side by side is a friendly arrangement, but not comfortable for conversation. Similarly sitting on a similar chair of equal height is the best position for conversation. Sitting on a higher chair gives unconscious dominance; sitting at a lower level implies subservience.

How can I use this information?

As mentioned above, it's not recommended to use false body language as this will often be seen for what it is. However, you may want to make sure that you are displaying the appropriate gestures during – for instance – a presentation or team briefing, where it would look unnatural to suppress all your natural gestures.

You may also want to be aware of the body language other people are displaying, and try to read 'between the lines' of what they are saying, such as when trying to get to the root cause of an issue or problem. This may help you decide when to probe deeper into an answer given during an interview or a OTOM for example.



For related topics see Top Tips:

→ **Communication**