

How to Read Body Language: Part Two

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

Professor Ray Birdwhistell of the University of Louisville determined that more than two-thirds of communication in face-to-face settings takes place nonverbally. Fellow researcher Albert Mehrabian discovered that only 7 percent of communication is verbal. His studies indicated that 38 percent of communication can be attributed to the tone of one's voice while a whopping 55 percent results from facial expression and body language. Add to this the fact that nonverbal communication reveals a person's true feelings when it is contrary to spoken language. People may be dishonest in what they say but facial expressions and other body language tend to be more telling. When a person's words and body language are consistent, we believe that person. When their words and body language say different things, we tend to believe the body language and doubt the words. Bottom line. You need to be cognizant of nonverbal communication and how to use it to your best advantage to be an effective communicator.

Using Body Language Effectively

Always be as aware of a person's body language as you are of the words they speak. When you first meet someone, it is not unusual for them to appear nervous or reserved. This makes sense. After all, they don't know you and don't know what to expect. If you have perfected your nonverbal communication you will most likely be able to set them at ease. As a result they will tend to display more open body language.

If someone responds positively to you, you know you are on the right track. If you sense a negative reaction you should change gears and modify the direction you are headed in. Try to figure out what the problem is to determine how to proceed.

Try asking open-ended questions to increase involvement. Focus on the other person's interests. Figure out something you have in common to establish increased rapport before moving ahead.

Being an Effective Listener

Lean forward slightly. If you lean backward the other person may be confused. Are you comfortable or distracted? Are you simply relaxed or are you being disrespectful?

Pay attention to your posture. It speaks volumes. Don't slump. It's unattractive and riddled with negative nonverbal cues. If you are seated, sit up straight and leave your arms and legs uncrossed. If you are standing, don't lean against walls or doors as if you cannot support yourself. Refrain from constantly shifting your body weight from one foot to the other. It's distracting.

Be attentive and try not to fidget. Don't finger your jewelry, hair, clothing, or anything in your pockets. It suggests boredom and impatience with the speaker or the topic. Either way, it is unattractive.

Maintain good eye contact. It says you are paying attention. It says you are interested. It says you want to be there. Avoid staring, however. It will only make others uncomfortable.

Be aware of what you are doing with your arms and hands. If you fold your arms in front of you others may interpret this to mean you are unreceptive. Resting your clasped hands in your lap suggests you are critical of what is being said. Can't you just picture someone doing this with pursed lips?

Nod your head from time to time. It lets others know that you are actively listening.

Be an Effective Speaker

Face the person you are addressing. Sitting at an angle or facing away from someone suggests you are not interested. It may also make you look rude.

Use a conversational tone. Change the pace at which you speak occasionally to maintain interest. Place emphasis on certain words and phrases to underscore important points you are making. Use pitch and volume to your advantage. And don't race through what you have to say. You will appear to be nervous.

Stand about two feet away from the person you are talking to. It's a distance you should both feel comfortable with. Standing closer will make the other person feel as though you are encroaching on their space which triggers defensiveness. Standing further away is awkward and will make the other person question how you feel about them.

Use gestures to emphasize the points you make but limit the space in which you make them. Avoid pointing at anything or anyone -- especially the person you are talking to. It is not only bad manners, it is aggressive and will not be well received.

The experts have conducted many studies that demonstrate the importance of nonverbal communication. Being aware of what their research indicates is just one more way you can be sure to communicate to the best of your ability.

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