

## **Body Language Tells It All—or Does It?**

### *Reading Body Language Can Be Tricky Business*

By Denise Horan

The job candidate who crosses his arms tightly and doesn't look the interviewer in the eye appears to be hiding something and may not get the job. The person across the bargaining table who shifts uncomfortably in his seat and blinks often is probably not on his way to winning the negotiation. In a poker game, it's called a "tell," a subtle indication that can indicate doubt, misery, excitement or deceit.

The term "body language" has been part of our verbal lingo since the sixties when researchers took an interest in studying human behavioral clues. A stance, an expression or arm position can speak volumes about what one is really thinking, but the science of reading non-verbal communication takes knowledge and practice.

Denise Horan, principal of Integrated Management & Sales Consulting, has been studying body language for the past few years to help others be more successful in business. Horan says, "Learning to read body language effectively is an art and a science. There are so many factors that affect body language including our energy levels, culture and personality. The more you get to know someone, the better you can "read" them. It is so important to listen and observe before judging. The more you learn about common body language movements, the better you become at effectively using these signals to achieve success."

In business we learn that the most effective conversations happen in person when you can read facial features and gauge reactions, but much of today's communication occurs over the phone, text and email. We've all had the experience of sending an email that was totally misunderstood by the recipient. The pen may indeed be mightier than the sword—but at least you have to be in the same room to use a sword.

So, why the renewed interest in body language? Is it a gut reaction to a growing culture that now conducts most of its communication without a body in sight? Here is a basic primer on how body language can provide clues into what a person is thinking:

***The Greeting:*** Shaking hands is often the first step in a person-to-person introduction. Your grip should be firm but not bone-crunching. Shakers who hold on too long or squeeze too hard are perceived as aggressive or just plain mean. Weak or limp handshakes can indicate a lack of confidence or fortitude. Handshakes should be delivered in combination with direct eye contact.

***The Eyes Have It:*** Is your listener looking you in the eye, staring at the floor or looking over your shoulder for the next conversational opportunity? Good eye contact is an important aspect of productive conversation but don't stare down your opponent or you'll be viewed as aggressive. A good rule of thumb is to look the speaker in the eye at least 60% of the time.

***Mind Your Position:*** When your partner in conversation folds his arms across his chest, he may be closed to what you are saying. Conversely, it could mean he is enrapt in your conversation and is concentrating heavily on your pearls of wisdom. Or, maybe the window is open, and he feels a cold chill. In body language, no single clue gives you the answer. Consider other bodily elements: Is your listener smiling and nodding in agreement or looking away with weight shifted and one foot tapping impatiently. Pay attention to the cues, and you'll get the message.

Linda Allen, an Oklahoma-based speaker and trainer specializing in cultural awareness, says actions often speak louder than words. "In Western cultures, direct eye contact is the expected norm; it indicates confidence, honesty and trust. In these cultures lowered eyes provoke a lack of trust. However, in Native American and Asian cultures, lowered eyes are a sign of respect and honor."

Mirroring body language is another tool that can be used to bond and build understanding. According to some scientists, the part of our brain that allows us to recognize faces and expressions also causes us to mimic others' expressions. When you mirror a person's sitting position, tone of voice and talking pace, he or she will be inclined to like you. But don't mirror negative body language, or the person will not like you.

Reading body language can be tricky business. When all else fails, remember that the easiest and most sincere form of body language is the smile. It's understood in all languages and cultures around the world.