

Body Language

Understanding body language is very much an art rather than a science. If you are able to understand and read someone else's body language, it gives you a great opportunity in the way you respond to them. When you are interpreting body language you have to consider all the signals they are sending. Taking one element in isolation, means we will misinterpret the message. A classic misinterpretation is when someone folds their arms, most people consider that the person has gone on the defensive – wrong! It could be opposite, that they are being aggressive, or relaxed, or cold, or comfortable.

Congruent Messages

We need to learn how to control our own body language and ensure that we send a congruent message. What we mean by that, is that your message, tone and body language are all in harmony. If we can do that it means our communication will be effective and have a positive impact on who we are talking to. The opposite is an incongruent message, which will create confusion in the receiver of the message. If we are able to master nonverbal communication it means we will always convey the right message, even when we are dealing with conflicting or a difficult situation.

Our body language communication is handled by the subconscious of the person or people we are dealing with. The way they react or respond to you depends on your body language and how we are communicating our message. We can therefore tune into their reactions and read whether we are getting our message right. We don't need to do this all the time but we need to think about their reaction when the communication is important to us.

Likewise, our own bodies transmit messages without us consciously instructing them to do so, and these messages have an effect on the subconscious reaction of the person we are communicating with.

3 Steps

First thing to do is to become consciously aware of body language, analyse our gut reaction to someone, and see if it is being affected by their body language. We also need to be aware of our own body language to make sure we are saying the appropriate things via non-verbal communication.

The second thing to understand is that body language can be either congruent or incongruent. Congruent means that the message we are giving with words, tone of voice and body language is all the same. This is the most effective way to communicate. So, if you are saying something exciting and

positive, the message will be more effective if you look energetic, enthusiastic and generally as though you believe it.

The third thing to understand is the difference between positive and negative body language. Positive body language is any language that has a positive effect on a person receiving it; conversely, negative has a negative effect. At work positive body language is essentially open. It involves an open stance, positive gestures with open hands, weight and body is evenly balanced, you make good eye contact with the person you are talking to and your facial expression is relaxed and positive.

Negative Body Language

Negative body language breaks into two major types. You can appear shifty, evasive and unreliable – the passive type or you can appear aggressive, bullying, dominating and closed minded – the aggressive type. The passive body language is characterised by things like, avoiding direct eye contact, keeping the chin low, perhaps folding the arms across the chest, standing unbalanced, looking uncomfortable. The aggressive type is characterised by things like, forceful gestures, pointing, strong eye contact, upright and clenched fists.

The two varieties of negative body language have a negative effect on the person seeing them and they detract from the message you are trying to put across. You also need to remember that although someone appears passive or aggressive, it does not mean that what they are saying is not reliable. The trouble is that we are adversely affected by the negative body language and so do not take on board all that they say.

In fact, passive body language may mean that the person is acutely nervous but not in the least bit shifty or evasive. Aggressive postures, too, can be a compensation for nerves. This is where being conscious of the effects of body language becomes important. Once you understand the importance of body language, you are then able to apply your conscious mind to interpreting the messages coming across, rather than letting your subconscious mind determine your reactions.

If we are under pressure, then it is harder to maintain a positive congruent message. To be able to do this it means consciously controlling your body language, especially if you are nervous or under pressure. This means remaining open and positive, but being more measured in how you use gestures, facial expression and tone. We need to slow down our response so that we ensure we are giving the right response and controlling any reaction we may be having.

It Ain't Wot You Say, It's The Way Wot You Say It!

If you can remember the above principle, it will help you ensure that you get your message right.

To make someone we are talking to feel more at ease and to increase rapport, there are a number of things we can do.

To ensure we get our body language congruent, we need to ensure that we send the right signals and messages to our receiver. At the same time, we need to read their responses. There are a variety of aspects to nonverbal communication (NVC) so let's explore some of these.

Posture

Our stance can signal how we are feeling about a situation. We need to ensure that our body position communicates the right message. A rigid stance can signal a desire to dominate. Being slouched can be relaxing, however it could be interpreted as being unbothered or uninterested. We need to ensure that posture stays relaxed and upright, but also staying open.

Gestures

Physical mannerisms have a huge impact on the transference of your message to the receiver. It has been shown that if you use gestures when you communicate, then your message will be more effective. That's why politicians are often taught to use gestures whilst speaking, however often their gestures are incongruent with their message. This can make their gestures nonsensical and contrived. Use gestures that are natural and connect with the language you are using.

Gestures can also be give away signs. Our subconscious will often use gestures to signal our underlying feelings or concerns, so in a more pressurised situation, try to control your gestures.

Facial Expression

If you can learn to control your facial expression, then you can ensure that control the response you are sending. Some people have a more naturally animated face and they often find it hard to control their reactions. We need recognise that at times, especially in the work place, that a responsive facial expression, is much better than a reactive one.

The first step to doing that is to control your breathing. This ensures that your expression will stay calm. You also need to make your gestures smaller and slower. The final part is to control the tone of your voice. If you control your voice, you control your face. I am sure you have all met an individual who has a really boring tone, but that also shows on their face, they look bored as well!

We don't want to appear bored, however if we keep our tone calm but with some expression, our face will appear the same. This technique is especially important when you are under pressure.

The face is one of most important factors to observe when you are in an important communication. When we are working someone and we want to read their reaction, it will be the face that will often indicate under lying thinking. It is usually the small reactions rather than the more obvious ones that are important. Look for small changes or reactions to what you are saying, and when you see these, it can help you understand and explore underlying messages.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is stronger when people like each other or get on well with each other. The longer and the more frequent the looks, indicates a high degree of interest in what is being said. Very strong eye contact will indicate aggression or intimidation. Evasive eye contact will signal a lack of confidence or shyness. What is reasonable eye contact? Good reasonable eye contact is usually when we hold eye contact for around 5 seconds, then we would usually glance away or look down.

If you are dealing with someone who has very strong eye contact and you are finding it difficult to look at them, there is a simple thing you can do. Look at the top of the bridge of their nose or just between their eyebrows. You will then appear to be having very strong eye contact in return.

Leg and Feet Movements

We don't usually think about the position of our feet or legs when communicating. They can often be useful to look at as they will usually signal subconscious thoughts. Try and identify the orientation of the other person's feet. If they are directed towards you this is useful sign, as it signals interest. If they are pointed away from you, it can often mean that the person wants to walk away from you. Feet moving about in an uncomfortable situation are literally saying 'help'. Leg movements are less likely to be controlled in a contrived way.

Proximity and Orientation

The distance maintained between people varies in different cultures. We need to ensure that we don't invade someone's space. Showing respect for space is important. I am sure you have all met the 'space invader' where they stand too close, you feel you have to back away from them. To deal with them, change your orientation from face on to side on, that way they have to go further to invade your body space.

We have already discussed the orientation of feet. You also need to ensure that your body is turned towards the other person. You don't want to be directly opposite as that is confrontational. Position yourself so that you are side on or at an angle, but turned towards the individual. Evidence suggests, that when sitting side-by-side people tend to co-operate but when facing, they tend to compete.

Conclusion

Because we spend our whole lives communicating we tend to accept our communication skills as a natural ability and devote little attention to analysis and development of technique. We can make our communication more effective by considering a few basic principles and adopting a few basic techniques.

So you are now prepared for those board games. When you are sitting at the table, and you know you are onto a winner, keep your poker face by breathing slowly and controlling your vocal mannerisms. Keep your hand gestures and body movement low key, that way you can ensure you keep your winning hand or last clue for Cluedo to yourself!

