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The meaning behind the move

Here's how to read body language and use that knowledge in your negotiations

Question:

How do I make body language work to my advantage in a negotiation?

Answer:

A skillful negotiator listens beyond words. A skillful negotiator hears the silent messages communicated from nonverbal cues and actions.

Let's say, for example, you are talking with Jessie. You are sitting across from one another at an oval conference table. You finish the first item on your agenda and all seems to be going well. Then you ask Jessie whether she would be available to help complete an important project. Almost immediately, but very subtly, you see her upper body shift away from you. Although her voice sounds enthusiastic, she looks away from you when she says she would be glad to provide assistance. You coordinate a time to review the information she needs to get started. When you go to shake her hand, you sense reluctance, even though she has a smile on her face. As you walk back to your office, your gut is telling you that she's not going to get the job done and you're not exactly sure why.

We have all engaged in discussions that seemed to be agreeable on a verbal level, but on deeper level we sensed that another agenda was afoot. Such disparity is caused by mismatch between what is being said and the nonverbal cues that simultaneously are being offered.

For the most part, nonverbal messages, which are processed unconsciously, make up over 65% of our communications. Our conscious mind processes between 125 and 150 words per minute while our unconscious mind processes between 400 and 800 words per minute. That means our unconscious mind processes five times as many messages as our conscious mind within the same timeframe. That explains why you had doubts about Jessie's ability to deliver on the project. You picked up her nonverbal messages — moving away from you with her upper body and then looking away from you when she "enthusiastically" agreed to provide assistance.

When negotiating, you want to be mindful of body language from two perspectives.

The first, and absolutely the most important, is your body language. When you are negotiating, are you in control of the nonverbal messages you are communicating to the other party? Are you deliberately sending the nonverbal message that matches your communications or are your emotions influencing your nonverbal communications?

The second perspective is the other party's body language. Interpreting the other party's nonverbal cues begins with understanding the probable meanings. Without understanding the exact context in which the gesture was used, it's difficult to be exact about intent. For example, it is often assumed that when people cross their arms they are closing themselves off from the other party. That suggests a high level of resistance. However, if you were to understand that they were sitting under a cooling fan and were chilled, the meaning changes.

To help you understand the meaning behind some basic body language gestures, listed below is a description and general interpretation of some nonverbal cues. As you read through them, think of a time when you noticed such behaviors in others during a negotiation. That will help you become more conscious in reading nonverbal communications.

- **Sitting on the edge of the chair** – This suggests interest. As a person moves from sitting back in their chair to sitting forward, it is a good indication that his or her interest is increasing.
- **Sitting back with hands clasped behind the head** – This usually indicates confidence, or is a sign the person is content. This gesture is used more by men than females.
- **During the negotiation, the person pushes back from the table either shaking his or her head from side to side or folding his or her arms** – This is an indication of some level of resistance. It may not be toward you, but may be relative to how that idea would be received by others. Regardless, take the time to understand the cause.
- **Hands are open, on the table and relaxed** – This person is probably open to what you have to say.
- **Fingers covering the mouth** – Usually means the person is thinking or intently listening.
- **Hands to face** – This means the person is either evaluating or listening.
- **Touching ears, nose or neck with jerky movements** – This is a sign of impatience.
- **Fidgeting with an object (pen, toy, finger tapping)** – The person is bored and wants you to either move more quickly or wrap up.
- **Sitting back in the chair, arms either crossed in front or resting on the chair** – This is an indication that the person is processing and working through ideas. As soon as possible, stop talking and give the person room to

think.

- **Steady eye contact** – The person is engaged. These people need to see what you are saying. Be descriptive in your communications; draw ideas on paper, flip chart or white board whenever possible to show your ideas.
- **Avoiding eye contact** – The person is either ill at ease or is unable to tell you what is really on his or her mind.
- **Picking at their clothes** – These people have some level of disagreement to what is being communicated. If they are breathing with a heavy sigh, they are bored.
- **Steeple (fingers coming together with a space in-between the hands)** – This is a sign of confidence and readiness to proceed.

It's important to keep in mind that nonverbal cues are part of a larger picture. For example, if you are talking with a person who keeps adjusting his or her eyeglasses, while it may appear the person is fidgeting, in reality something may be causing discomfort, and the person is trying to find an adjustment that works.

As much as we attempt to study communications and how ideas are expressed and received, we must also remember that people don't always say what they mean, nor do they always mean what they say.

As a skilled negotiator, it's your responsibility to listen intently for the meaning, to observe and to clarify before responding. Effective negotiators never assume anything. They verify the meaning behind the signals they are receiving and respond appropriately.

With Jessie, it would be appropriate to go back to her and say: "Jessie, I know you said you would work on the project, but my sense is that something is just not right. Can we talk about this?" You might learn that she was assigned another project earlier that day and the timing of the two is overwhelming for her. She was afraid to tell you she couldn't do it because she was afraid she would look incompetent. Or maybe she never did anything like this before and is intimidated. She's excited about the opportunity but fearful she will not meet your expectations.

Whatever the reason, you now have tangible information to help you make a strategic decision.

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