

## Body Language: Picking Up and Understanding Nonverbal Signals

Lauren sighed. She'd just received an email from her boss, Gus, saying that the product proposal she'd been working on wasn't going to be signed off after all.

It didn't make any sense. A week ago, she'd been in a meeting with Gus and he'd seemed really positive about it all. Sure, he hadn't made much eye contact, and he kept looking out of the window at something. But she'd just put that down to him being busy. And, he'd **said** that "the project will probably get the go-ahead."

If Lauren had known a little bit more about body language, she'd have realized that Gus **was** trying to tell her that he wasn't "sold" on her idea. He just wasn't using words.

In this article, we'll define what is meant by body language, and how you can read and interpret it to understand people better and communicate with them more effectively.

### What Is Body Language?

Put simply, body language is the unspoken element of communication that we use to reveal our true feelings and emotions. Our gestures, facial expressions and posture, for instance. When we are able to "read" these signs, we can use it to our advantage. For example, it can help us to understand the **complete** message of what someone is trying to say to us, and to enhance our awareness of people's reactions to what **we** say and do. We can also use it to adjust our own body language so that we appear more positive, engaging and approachable.

### How to Read Negative Body Language

Being aware of negative body language in others can allow you to pick up on unspoken issues or bad feelings. So, in this section, we'll highlight some negative nonverbal signals that you should look out for.

### Difficult Conversations and Defensiveness

Difficult or **tense conversations** are an uncomfortable fact of life at work. Perhaps you've had to deal with a **difficult customer**, or needed to talk to someone about his or her **poor performance**. Or maybe you've negotiated a major contract. Ideally, these situations would be resolved calmly. But, often they are complicated by feelings of nervousness, stress, **defensiveness**, or even **anger**. And, though we may try to hide them, these emotions often show through in our body language. For example, if someone is exhibiting one or more of the following behaviors, he will likely be disengaged, disinterested or unhappy (see figure 1):

- Arms folded in front of the body.
- Minimal or tense facial expression.
- Body turned away from you.
- Eyes downcast, maintaining little contact.

**Figure 1.**



Being aware of these signs can help you to adjust what you say and how you say it, so you can make him feel more at ease and receptive to your viewpoint (see figure 2).

**Figure 2.**



### **Avoiding Unengaged Audiences**

When you need to deliver a presentation, or to **collaborate** in a group, you want the people around you to be 100 percent engaged. Here are some "telltale" signs that people may be bored or disinterested in what you're saying (see figures 3-6):

- Sitting slumped, with heads downcast.
- Gazing at something else, or into space.
- Fidgeting, picking at clothes, or fiddling with pens and phones.
- Writing or doodling.

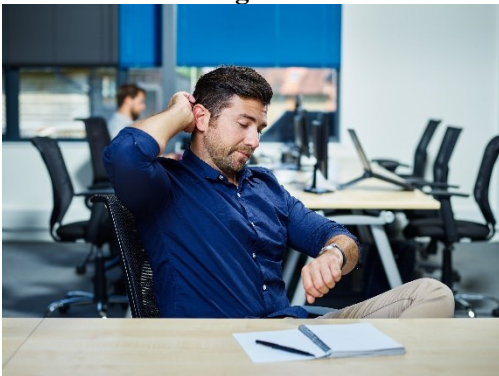
**Figure 3.**



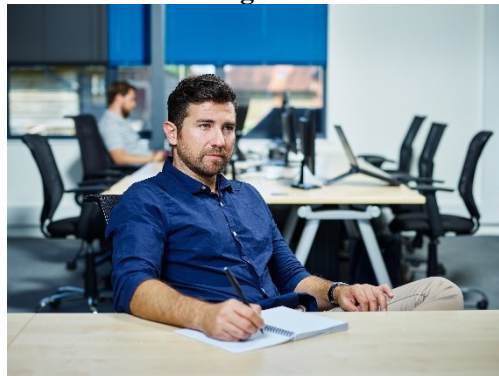
**Figure 4.**



**Figure 5.**



**Figure 6.**



When you notice that someone is **disengaged**, you're in a better position to do something about it. For example, you can re-engage her by asking her a direct question, or by inviting her to contribute an idea of her own.

### **How to Project Positive Body Language**

When you use positive body language, it can **add strength** to the verbal messages or ideas that you want to convey, and help you to avoid sending mixed or confusing signals. In this section, we'll describe some basic postures that you can adopt to project self-confidence and openness.

### **Making a Confident First Impression**

These tips can help you to adjust your body language so that you make a great **first impression** :

- **Have an open posture.** Be relaxed, but don't slouch! Sit or stand upright and place your hands by your sides (see figure 7). Avoid standing with your hands on your hips, as this will make you appear larger, which can communicate aggression or a desire to dominate (see figure 8).
- **Use a firm handshake.** But don't get carried away! You don't want it to become awkward or, worse, painful for the other person. If it does, you'll likely come across as rude or aggressive.
- **Maintain good eye contact.** Try to hold the other person's gaze for a few seconds at a time. This will show her that you're sincere and engaged. But, avoid turning it into a staring match! (See figure 9.)
- **Avoid touching your face.** There's a common perception that people who touch their faces while answering questions are being **dishonest** (see figure 10). While this isn't always true, it's best to avoid fiddling with your hair or touching your mouth or nose, particularly if your aim is to come across as trustworthy.

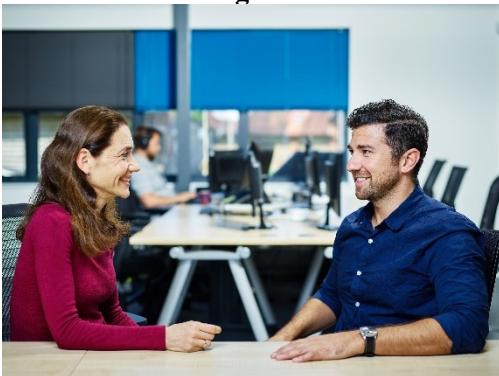
**Figure 7.**



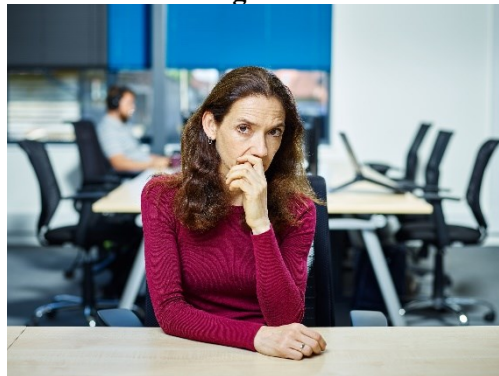
**Figure 8.**



**Figure 9.**



**Figure 10.**



## Public Speaking

Positive body language can also help you to engage people, to mask **presentation nerves**, and to project **confidence** when you speak in public. Here are a few tips that can help you to do this:

- **Have a positive posture.** Sit or stand upright, with your shoulders back and your arms unfolded and at your sides or in front of you (see figure 11). Don't be tempted to put your hands in your pockets, or to slouch, as this will make you look disinterested.
- **Keep your head up.** Your head should be upright and level (see figure 12). Leaning too far forward or backward can make you look aggressive or arrogant.
- **Practice and perfect your posture.** You'd practice your presentation beforehand, so why not practice your body language, too? Stand in a relaxed manner, with your weight evenly distributed. Keep one foot slightly in front of the other – this will help you to maintain your posture (see figure 13).
- **Use open hand gestures.** Spread your hands apart, in front of you, with your palms facing slightly toward your audience. This indicates a willingness to communicate and to share ideas (see figure 14). Keep your upper arms close to your body. Take care to avoid overexpression, or people may pay more attention to your hands than to what you're saying.

**Figure 11.**



**Figure 12.**



**Figure 13.**



**Figure 14.**



**Tip:**

If you notice that your audience's concentration is starting to slip, try to lean **slightly** forward while you speak. This suggests that you are taking them into your confidence and will help you to regain their attention.

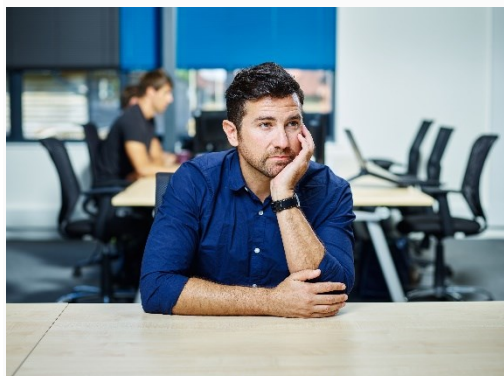
**Interviews, Negotiations and Reflection**

Body language can also help you to stay calm in situations where emotions have the potential to run high – a **negotiation** , for example, or a **performance review** . Use the following tips to defuse tension and demonstrate openness:

- **Use mirroring.** If you can, subtly mirror the body language of the person you're talking to. This will make him feel more at ease, and can **build rapport** . But don't copy **every** gesture that he makes, as this will likely make him feel uncomfortable, or that you're not taking him seriously.
- **Relax your body.** It can be difficult to keep emotions at bay, particularly in nerve-wracking situations such as an **interview** or appraisal. But you can maintain the appearance of calm by keeping your hands still, and by avoiding fidgeting with your hair or touching your face.
- **Look interested.** As we suggested above, touching your face or mouth can signal dishonesty. But it can also demonstrate that you're thinking. So, if you are asked a complex question, it's OK to briefly

touch your cheek or stroke your chin. This will show the other person that you're reflecting on your answer before you respond (see figure 15).

**Figure 15.**



**Note:**

While the tips covered in this article are a good general guide for interpreting body language, it's important to remember that they won't necessarily apply to everyone. This is particularly the case if someone has a **different cultural background** from you, for instance.

Avoid making generalized assumptions. If you're getting mixed signals, check that your interpretation of the person's body language is correct by asking him questions and getting to know him better. After all, the ability to interpret body language is a complementary skill, not a substitute for **listening** to and understanding people.

**Key Points**

Body language refers to the nonverbal signals that you use to communicate your feelings and intentions. It includes your posture, your facial expressions, and your hand gestures.

The ability to understand and to interpret body language can help you to pick up on unspoken issues, problems or negative feelings that other people might have. You can also use it in a positive way to add strength to your verbal messages.

Negative body language includes:

- Folded arms.
- Tense facial expression.
- Body turned away from you.
- Poor eye contact.

Positive body language includes:

- Open body position (arms unfolded).
- Upright posture.
- Relaxed and open facial expression.
- Arms hanging relaxed by the sides.
- Regular eye contact.

## Avoiding Cross-Cultural Faux Pas: Body Language



### Crossed legs can cross the line in some cultures.

You feel the meeting has gone really well. You sit back, smile, casually hook one leg over the other, and give your new client a cheery thumbs up. Suddenly, a chill descends on the room. Oh dear. If your meeting was in the Middle East, Greece or Japan, you've just committed at least one, and perhaps two, serious cultural faux pas.

You could be discussing a potential collaboration with an organization in Bulgaria, and you nod your head in approval of what your host is proposing. Unfortunately, in some parts of the country, a nod can mean you disagree with him!

In this article, we'll discuss why it's important to be aware of the different meanings body language has in different countries and cultures. And we look at some of the faux pas you should avoid when working around the world.

### The Importance of Cultural Awareness

In today's global business environment, you will likely visit foreign countries or build working relationships overseas. You may work directly with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Even if you work solely in your home country, you may have clients, colleagues, contractors, or suppliers from elsewhere.

This makes it important for you to understand cultural differences, for example, in clothing, food, communication, and body language. Showing respect for other cultures is also good business practice.

Developing **Cultural Intelligence** will improve your working relationships and potentially make you more successful. Conversely, getting it wrong can cause offense and misunderstanding that could, in extreme cases, lose you business or damage important relationships.

### Common Cross-Cultural Differences

When you are dealing with people from different cultures, you should both understand that perceived insults are often entirely unintentional. So, while there are some general behaviors to be aware of, not every breach of etiquette will cause deep offense. Here are some examples of body language to be aware of:

- **Use of Hands or Fingers.** Everyday gestures that you use at home may have very different meanings abroad. For example, across the Middle East, it is seen as offensive to eat or offer gifts with the left hand, and a "thumbs up" gesture is also considered rude. Circling your index finger and thumb in an "A-OK" sign is frowned upon in Brazil, Germany and Russia, where it represents a part of the human body.

Pointing is a no-no in China, Japan, Indonesia, and Latin America, and beckoning someone with a curled index finger "goes against the grain" in Slovakia, China, South East Asia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

- **Greetings.** There's nothing simple about a simple handshake! While it is accepted as the norm pretty much worldwide, too firm a grip is seen as aggressive in many parts of the Far East, where a bow is still highly regarded. Handshakes in the Middle East often last longer than they do in Europe.
- **Sitting.** Be aware of your posture when you attend meetings or are dining. Sitting cross-legged is seen as disrespectful in Japan, especially in the presence of someone older or more respected than you. Showing the soles of your shoes or feet can offend people in parts of the Middle East. That is why throwing shoes at someone is a form of protest and an insult in many parts of the world – as former U.S. President George W. Bush famously discovered on a visit to Iraq in 2008.
- **Eye Contact.** The degree of eye contact that is considered acceptable varies from country to country. Is it better, for example, to look someone in the eye, to hold their gaze, or to keep your eyes averted deferentially?  
Across Latin America and Africa, extended eye contact is seen as a challenge whereas, in the U.S. and Western Europe, it shows you are taking an interest in what someone is saying and is regarded as a sign of confidence. In the Middle East, eye contact beyond a brief glance between the sexes is deemed inappropriate.
- **Touch.** To what extent it is considered acceptable to be "touchy-feely" also varies from country to country. Compare, for example, the famous British "reserve" with the much more tactile conventions and traditions of many Arab, southern European, or Latin American countries.  
An innocent hug made headlines around the world in 2009 when America's first lady, Michelle Obama, broke royal protocol on a visit to Britain by giving the Queen a squeeze!
- **Gender.** In many cultures, what is acceptable for a man may not be acceptable for a woman. The most obvious example is the issue of covering your head in some Muslim countries but also, within religions such as Islam and Hinduism, shaking a woman's hand can be considered offensive.

## How to Avoid Committing Cultural Faux Pas

The best way to avoid inadvertently causing offense with your body language is to learn as much as you can about the country's etiquette, values and styles of communication before you visit.

### Key Points

Hand, eye, facial, and body gestures can have very different meanings in different countries and cultures. How you sit or greet someone, or the extent to which you should reach out and touch someone, may all be read in different and unexpected ways.

Being able to display cultural intelligence will improve your working relationships and potentially make you more successful in an increasingly globalized, multi-cultural working world.

The key is simply to learn as much as you can about a country's etiquette, values and communication styles before you visit.

From: <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/cultural-faux-pas-body-language.htm>