

# Incongruence: do you send mixed messages that prevent you from succeeding?

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Whenever I am asked to analyse body language on television, whether it is commenting on Tony Blair's parliamentary resilience for BBC News or critiquing the bad behaviour of contestants on *Big Brother*, the producers are always most interested in whether what we are seeing is real. Are their smiles fake? Are they lying? What secret are they trying to cover up?

It all boils down to one thing: are they giving off mixed messages? Most people are quite intuitive about detecting mixed messages, and in business projecting mixed messages can be highly counter-productive. The science of body language gives us the tools to describe ways in which people's bodies and voices may present emotions that are at odds with what they are saying. It also can be used to *clean up* problems that stem from giving off mixed messages.

## Incongruence: mixed messages

Consider a nurse who tells a male patient, "The lump the surgeons removed was nothing; you're going to be fine," while she scratches her nose.

The patient then asks, "So it wasn't cancer?"

The nurse looks down and away from the patient's eyes while she says, "No, it was just ... a mole."

"So, did you tell my wife the good news yet?" the patient asks.

At this point the nurse says, "No, I was going to do that right now," and she rushes off sobbing with tears in her eyes.

The nurse had two contradictory things going on in her mind: the patient's prognosis, represented by the nurse's body language, and the lie that the patient was going to be fine, represented by the nurse's words. In this situation the words tell one story, while the body language is a commentary on what the nurse really feels about what is being said.

## Is what you show different from what you feel?

In Japan they have two words expressing this dichotomy: *hon-ne*, which is what you really feel (literally *true sound*) and *tatemae*, which is what you show (literally *façade*). The goal of *tatemae* is not to fool others so much as to participate in and augment *wa*, social harmony. For example in January 1992, then-president George Bush (Sr.) visited Japan to discuss America's trade imbalance with Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa. The trip went well, with a minor exception: during a formal dinner in which the president was served Japanese-style steak, Bush was

taken ill — and he vomited directly into Miyazawa's lap as Miyazawa cradled the President's head. As Bush lay on the floor he then said, "Why don't you just roll me under the table and let me sleep it off?" A few minutes later Bush emerged saying he felt "great." Bush's representatives described the incident to the media as stomach flu, and Miyazawa later dismissed the incident as absolutely "normal." Within the world of *hon-ne*, one would imagine that Miyazawa's personal feeling about being vomited on was that it was not normal, by the President of the United States, or by anyone else for that matter.

## Winning

In contrast with the Japanese, Americans do not value social harmony above virtually everything else; Americans value winning. Whereas social harmony involves occasional conflicts between one's *hon-ne* and one's external behaviour, in most sports winning is most likely when all of one's thoughts, feelings and actions are working together in the same direction. This explains the great mystery of sports commentators who have a habit of describing teams or individuals who are playing well with the phrase, "They really want to win." The mystery is why would a commentator say that?

There are almost no athletes who really want to lose.

However, it makes sense if an athlete's actions are divided by opposing motivations — for example if the athlete starts running for the ball, but they run carefully because of pain or because they are worried about injuring themselves.

## The magic ingredient?

*Congruence* is when all verbal and non-verbal behaviour supports one single outcome or message.

Congruence can be thought of as an inner harmony (although it is quite different from *wa*, which is social harmony), having no inner conflicts, or even being *in alignment*. Congruence is like an orchestra when everyone is playing in tune; there are no mixed messages. When a person's body language is congruent with what they are saying, this invariably leads to the person being thought of as sincere. When small children want something, they are nearly always congruent, because when they want something, they want it with all their heart, and their wanting is absolutely sincere (although not necessarily healthy or logical).

*Incongruence* is the opposite: incongruence is mixed messages. The obvious example is saying one thing and doing another, for example saying, "Yeah, I'm listening," said with a bored voice, with one's arms crossed over one's chest, body sideways toward the listener, and the gaze being directed in the opposite direction of the listener (figure 1). However, it is possible to be incongruent without saying anything at all, just with different parts of the body; for example, a



**Figure 1.**

"Do you hear what I am saying?"  
"Yeah, I'm listening..."

store clerk might look at you with a friendly and attentive look while drumming their fingers impatiently.

The most striking form of incongruence is when the two sides of the body do not match, such as an asymmetrical



**Figure 2**

**Slouching is a sign of incongruence.**

**A crooked smile also suggests mixed messages**

smile or when slouching to the side (figure 2).

Teenagers are the most

incongruent age group, because they have so many inner struggles and mutually conflicting drives; teenagers slouch and slump a lot, as well as mumbling and grunting.

## Working together

In almost all non-adversarial business situations, people are more likely to succeed when they are congruent. Management, customer service and sales are more *convincing* if they are accompanied by congruent body language and a congruent voice tone.

## Key point

Congruence is not something you have, it is something you do, and realistically it is something you can learn.

## Summary and Recommendations

- If you send out mixed signals, people may assume that you are hiding something: the truth, reservations about what has been said, or uncertainty. Often such an assumption will be correct, but not always.
- Many people accidentally leak signals of incongruity simply because they are unconfident in a particular situation, such as making presentations.
- Body language is a two-way street. It reflects your internal state, but it also helps to change your emotional state, and it can even affect your thoughts. By improving your body language externally, you can feel more confident inside.
- Correct body language can be practised and honed, beginning with good posture and appropriate eye contact. Having people watch you (or, better still, video tape you) is the fastest way to learn what you need to correct.

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## If you would like to find out more

Call Dr Harry Witchel on 0117 928 7817 or visit the web site at

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