

Why learning body language can be counter-productive

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We are asked about Body Language all the time, and talks and TV shows on the subject regularly get large audiences. This is no surprise when you consider the promises made by books on the subject: increased influence and power, the ability to detect lies, create instant rapport, even decode the secret signals of attraction!

Yet in no other area of communication is it truer that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Popular books on the subject have generalised, over-simplified and distorted the research to the point where their advice is worse than useless. In fact, it can actually be counter-productive.

Only 7%?

Take the frequently quoted statistic that only 7% of communication is verbal (the rest supposedly being split between 38% tone of voice and 55% visually detected gestures). I hear these figures quoted by speakers and trainers at least monthly, and in every audience I've asked, almost everyone present is familiar with them.

This is surprising when they are self-evidently false (try swearing during the middle of a religious service, or more subtly, tell your friend's mother that her outfit is "interesting").

If you go back to the research from which these figures are drawn, by Albert Mehrabian in 1967, you find that he made no such claim. His studies were based on around 62 female second year Californian college students. In an extremely simple laboratory-based experiment, they were shown a photo and played a recording of a *single* word in a variety of tones of voice, and asked their *attitude to the person in the photo* – that's all. The figures were derived by some clever statistics.

To get this completely in proportion: the small sample of women who took part in that study were 20-year-olds during the 'Summer of Love'. They will now (at the time of writing this - 2004) be in their late 50s, and it seems unlikely that they would agree that the way they made their decision in the 60s applies even to *them* today, let alone the general population of the planet.

"Only 7% of communication is words" is a lovely sound-bite, but it is also false.

The Dangers of "Mind-reading"

The process of wishful oversimplification is typical of popular business psychology¹ and body language books in particular. In our talks we show a picture of a woman standing with her arms and legs folded and a scowling expression. When we ask the audience what it "means", they say "bored" or "unfriendly". We then reveal a thought-bubble saying "Where's the Ladies Loo?" Suddenly the crossed legs have a different meaning. This gets a laugh, but it also demonstrates the serious point that we can't read minds based on generalisations about body postures, no matter how appealing the idea. And if we act as if we can read minds, we can get the wrong end of the stick.

Interestingly, some of the most effective practical exponents of body language don't work using pre-learned generalisations out of books.

¹ **Personality tests are a further example, especially perhaps the respectable but much misunderstood (and abused) Myers-Briggs Type Indicator**

Psychological illusionists who do mind-reading acts have an uncanny ability to read people. They use a completely different approach to interpreting behaviour, called 'cold-reading' by conjurers, or *calibration* by communication theorists, which relies on quickly and skilfully learning the repertoire of responses of each person. They systematically adjust their interpretations of gestures for each individual, and avoid the danger of assuming they know what's going on when they don't. Successful negotiators, interrogators and even poker players use a similar technique, sometimes without knowing it.

The calibrated approach to body language is learnable, and is invaluable in sales, presenting and relationship building.

Eyes across a crowded room

There's a final pitfall to talk about: studying generalised body language can lead shy people into increasing passivity.

Whether at a party or a business-social function such as a networking event, body language books claim you can predict whether or not someone will welcome an approach. The rewards for a successful approach can be high, but for many, the costs of 'rejection' (real or imagined) are higher. There is an appeal to being able to tell whether the other person will want to talk. The problem is that as I have already suggested, body language is ambiguous. If you wait for a sure-fire signal, you can wait for a long time. It's even possible that if the other person sees your hesitation, they may interpret it as hostile, and be even less likely to invite an approach (communication theorists call this kind of pattern a 'game-without-end', and psychologists talk about 'self-fulfilling prophecies').

Key point

Communication influences and changes body language on an ongoing basis. Body language is not fixed in advance, to be looked up in books. *The very act of approaching someone will change their behaviour.*

Summary and recommendations

- Much of the popular material on body language is wishful oversimplification from the research. Everyday experience will show it to be self-evidently false.
 - There is no single reliable “body language” - everyone has their own. Rather than generalise, better to treat each person as an individual.
 - People can sharpen their sensitivity to non-verbal behaviour. The calibration approach can be learned, and quickly yields results, especially for managers, salespeople, negotiators and presenters.
 - Relying on body language signals to know whether to talk with someone leads to passivity and self-fulfilling prophecies about people. These self imposed illusions can severely limit business (not to mention social) opportunities. Better to develop the willingness to act, and so to find out for sure.
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If you would like to find out more

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