

The Role of the Eyes in Interpersonal Communication **©copyright by Robert W. Lucas**

Recognizing, understanding, and appropriately reacting to the body language of others as well as using positive body language yourself will allow you to more effectively communicate with others. The key to "reading" body language is to realize that your interpretations should be used only as an indicator of someone's true message meaning. This is because background, culture, physical condition, communication ability, and many other factors influence whether and how well people use body cues. Remember that everyone may not use nonverbal cues in the same manner that you do. Placing too much value on nonverbal cues could lead to miscommunication and possibly a relationship breakdown. The following are some typical forms of body language.

Many aspects of nonverbal communication come into play when interacting with people in different situations; however one powerful source of messages comes from the human eye.

It has been said that the eyes are "the windows to the soul." Eye contact is very powerful. For example, many criminal investigators are often taught to observe eye movement in order to determine whether a suspect is being truthful or not. In most Western cultures, a guideline to use is that the typical comfort level for holding eye contact is 5-10 seconds, then an occasional glance away is normal. Looking away more often can send a message of disinterest or dishonesty. If either the length or frequency of eye contact is violated, many people might consider you rude or offensive. They might also interpret your behavior as an attempt to exert power or flirting. Either way, other may become uncomfortable and may react in an undesirable manner (e.g. become upset or leaves to avoid the contact). Additionally, looking down before answering questions, glancing away continually as someone talks to you, excessive blinking or eye flutter, and other such eye movements can create a negative impression.

Eye contact from someone else can send valuable messages to you. Whether they make direct eye contact with you could provide a variety of messages, such as lack of interest, confidence or trust, or honesty. For example, if you are watching a customer shop and note a quick aversion of eye contact, they may be nervous because they are shoplifting, or they simply might not want your attention and assistance.

According to D.G. Leathers in *Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles and Applications*, eye contact actually accomplishes a number of purposes:

- Indicate degrees of attentiveness, interest, and arousal;
- Help indicate and sustain intimate relationships;
- Influence attitude change and persuasion;
- Regulate interaction;
- Communicate emotions;
- Define power and status relationships;
- Assume a central role in the management of impressions.

Another aspect of nonverbal communication related to the eyes deals with the size of one's pupils. A good deal of research has been done on the correlation between a person's interest in an item or object being viewed and the size of the person's pupils. Typically, when someone is interested in an item or product being shown or topic, his or her pupils will dilate (grow larger). With practice, this fact can be parlayed into more effective communication or, in businesses, increased sales and customer satisfaction. This is because an astute person can watch for dilation as they interact with another person or as a customer looks over merchandise. For example, in a store, even if a customer displays only mild interest in an item after asking the price, and then moves on to another, the salesperson might be able to relate added features and benefits of the first item and sway the customer's decision.

Like anything else related to nonverbal communication, if you are using this technique, remember that there is room for misinterpreting a cue. To avoid this, listen carefully to voice tone and observe other signals in order to prevent the perception of being pushy.

Source: Lucas, R.W. (2005) *Customer Service: Building Successful Skills for the Twenty-First Century*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

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