

Body Language 20

Language of The Eyes

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

My article last week was about body language with the eyes. I kept the focus (no pun intended) on three aspects of ways we communicate with our eyes. They were: 1) eye contact, 2) pupil dilation, and 3) blinking rate. There are a host of other ways we communicate with gestures around the eyes, and this article will deal with several of them, even though no single blog article can cover them all.

Eyebrows

The eyebrows can add many meanings that you likely will recognize. When you see a person raise both eyebrows at the same time, it generally is a signal of surprise and it is



normally a positive gesture, as in the attached photo. We see this look on the faces of kids on Christmas Day when they look out the window and see a pony in the back yard.

Raising both eyebrows can also be a gesture of greeting between people. The meaning is that I am awake and happy to see you. If the mouth is in the form of an “O” rather than a smile, then the gesture usually means shock rather than pleasure.

Lowering both eyebrows is a negative gesture which often shows some level of aggression, concern, or intensity. This is often referred to as “furrowed” eyebrows with the accompanying mouth configuration tight-lipped and straight. You never see furrowed eyebrows along with a pleasant smile. Reason, it is nearly impossible to make these two gestures at the same time. If you doubt that, try it now.

Lowering only one eyebrow often means disapproval or suspicion. You would see this expression on the face of a parent if a child claims to have not eaten any cookies when there is chocolate all over his mouth. In the adult world, you might see this expression when a foreman tells his manager that none of his employees was taking more than ten minutes for the morning break.

Glances

There are suggested meanings for all kinds of glances, up, down, left, right. I would be a bit careful at being certain of a particular meaning with just one signal. Look for corroborating evidence with mouth or hand gestures. Here are the classic meanings as recorded by several authors.

Looking up – If a person lowers her head and glances upward, it often is a sign of submission. In many of the pictures of Princess Diana, you can observe that look.

Looking up and sideways – This gesture has the connotation of recalling something. Often it will be a picture or visual image that is being remembered when using this configuration. This gesture may also accompany a person who is trying to imagine something pleasant.

Looking down – This gesture has many possible meanings. The most common meaning is some form of shame. The individual may be averting his eyes due to guilt at having told a falsehood. The gesture also accompanies the recall of a feeling or emotion. A third possible meaning is that the person is confused or is searching for a word. A person may use this gesture in shutting down when feeling abused.

Looking left – This gesture may occur when a person is recalling a sound or verbal input.

Looking right – Most often this gesture is seen when a person is recalling an emotion or feeling.

Darting Eyes – Sometimes you will observe a person with an unsteady gaze. Shifting or darting eyes is an evasive gesture. The person is likely looking for some form of escape. It will most likely result in a lowering of trust, because you can instinctively sense the person is holding back in some way. Look at the eyes of most politicians when they are trying to answer a challenging question. The look is unmistakable.

These guidelines are rough at best, because glancing gestures are fleeting and may come in clusters. Also, if a person is left handed, the meanings could be reversed.

Other Common Gestures

Several eye gestures are common to most people and are rather easy to interpret. Here are a few examples you will probably recognize.

Rolling the eyes – This gesture is one of sarcasm. The person rolling his eyes may be bored, or just incredulous. Eye rolling is almost always done in response to someone else's verbal input, and it is rarely directed at the perpetrator. It is a means of communicating to a third party that you are not buying into what is being proposed. The literal meaning would be "I cannot believe this guy is wasting our time with this drivel."

Children often use this gesture as a form of exasperation or not wanting to accept what the parent is telling them. In this case, the gesture is usually aimed directly at the parent rather than a third party.

Squinting – Tightening the facial muscles in order to narrow the eye opening to a slit gives the appearance of wincing or finding the information hard to believe. Obviously, there can be a physiological cause as in a person looking in the direction of the sun.

Weeping – Tears may flow if a person is in great pain or is experiencing a peak period of joy. Do not assume you know what a person is thinking just because tears are flowing. I recall singing a song for a music teacher once. When I was done, she was weeping visibly. I assumed she either hated or loved my voice. It turned out that her crying had nothing to do with me. The particular song I sang was a courting song her husband used to sing to her. She was reliving happier days gone by.

Winking – This gesture is not that common, but it has gotten many people in trouble. The most common meaning of the gesture is a kind of bonding with a person across the room. You might wink at a fellow worker when he is advocating for your position in an argument with your boss. The danger is that this gesture may be misinterpreted as a sexual advance, a play for affection, or a lack of sincerity.

Looking down your nose – This gesture is a condescending one intended to make the recipient feel inferior. The extreme case of this gesture is if a person is wearing glasses and looks over them.

The best way to improve your interpretation accuracy is to become more conscious of the eye gestures you see in others. You have seen them all your life, but the majority of the time your interpretation has been subconscious. By increasing the intensity of observation, you can make your conscious mind become more aware of how you are processing the eye gestures of others. In turn, that will increase your conscious level of the signals you are sending to others all day, and it will improve your accuracy of communication.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

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