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Crossing Ankles

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



When young girls are posing for a class picture, they are taught that the proper sitting position is with ankles crossed and hands folded in their laps. Boys are taught to put both feet on the floor.

According to “Miss Manners,” as a cultural preference in the US, crossing ankles is the proper position for a seated woman. You rarely see that gesture actually used in a business setting.

Most women sit with their legs crossed where one leg is on top of the opposite knee. Men cross their legs by putting the ankle of one leg on the knee of the opposite leg in a “figure 4” position.

When a person crosses his or her ankles in a professional setting, it can be an indication of holding something back. The implication is the same whether the person is standing or sitting.

You can observe this gesture in many different contexts, but the underlying meaning is normally uncertainty. Here are some situations where you might see a person with crossed ankles. Later in this article I will share some tips on how to get people to uncross their ankles.

In job interviews

This situation is normally an uncomfortable time for all people. Even folks who are highly confident in their abilities will feel a bit ill at ease, because there is a lot at stake in an interview. Most often the person is sitting across a table or desk from the person conducting the interview.

It is too casual to sit with legs crossed in the normal manner, but sitting with both feet on the floor has a rigidity that many people want to avoid. Given these two extremes, it is common to see a person sitting with ankles crossed in a job interview.

In court or in a legal proceeding

These situations also are packed with tension for most people. Trying to find a comfortable sitting position when you are on the witness stand is a daunting task. Just recognize that the opposing lawyer is observing your body language in microscopic detail. If you cross your ankles, you can expect the cross examination to probe deeply to find out what you might be hiding or holding back.

At the doctor's office

In this case, you want to picture the doctor as your friend and ally, yet there can be a lot of discomfort involved, especially if you are not telling the absolute truth about your personal habits. The doctor will pick up on your level of nervousness and make some judgments about how candid you are being. That may affect the level of trust you are able to achieve with your physician. If you have never been uncomfortable in the doctor's office, I suspect you are an unusual case.

Buying a car or other major investment

In this case there is an assumed adversarial relationship between you and the sales person. You recognize that the sales person does this kind of negotiation every day, so this person is assumed to have a big advantage over the insecure person sitting across the table who buys a car only about once a decade. Your anxiety will often show by the way you are sitting.

Disciplining another person

Whether it is a disrespectful youth or a worker who has done something wrong, you will find yourself in a position of authority having to admonish another person from time to time. Recognizing there are right and wrong ways to have these crucial conversations, it is common for both parties in the discussion to be a bit nervous.

Working in a high stress environment

Telemarketers will often sit with ankles crossed as they try to make their points to a person on the line who often just wants the conversation to end. In addition, customer service people will sit that way as they try to resolve an issue for a person if they find it difficult to understand the customer's problem. They want to help but realize that sometimes that is difficult to do.

How can you get a person who is sitting with ankles crossed to relax and uncross them? The methods to do this are highly cultural specific, but there are some general ideas

that often can work. The first hint is to modulate your voice to be soothing and helpful. Use the “golden rule” and address the other person in a way that you would like to be addressed if the roles were reversed.

If you are sitting across a table or desk, you might move to another chair on the same side of the table as the other person, but only if the conversation is friendly and informal, otherwise it might be interpreted as an aggressive move. Also, if you hand something to the person, it causes him or her to move the upper body, which may cause the person to resettle the lower extremities.

If the person is crossing her ankles because that is how she was taught to sit in formal situations, these fixes may not work well, so don't belabor them.

Be more alert to how people sit and you can often pick up signs of a person who is holding back. Knowing there may be an issue will allow you to ask some clarifying questions and perhaps clear the air.

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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