

## Body Language 47

### Conflict

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Conflict brings out all kinds of body language that is rather easy to interpret. In this picture, we see one individual trying to make a point but the other person completely blocking out the information, at least on the surface.

There is a significant caution before I get into the analysis to follow. You cannot judge the totality of what is going on from a single picture or view of what is happening. The attached photo, may not tell the whole story. One person is speaking in anger or frustration, and the other person is obviously shutting her out. It is clear that there is conflict going on, but it is not clear where, why, and how the conflict began. It probably predates this specific conversation.

Also, keep in mind that in any situation both parties are acting according to their own viewpoint of what is right to do. Each person is totally justified in her own mind, and each is frustrated.

When trying to assess what is going on in communication between individuals, you need a lot more background and information to figure out why each person is acting the way she is.

Is there a history of conflict between these two people? Does the speaker or listener have a history of conflict with others in the office? If a person habitually brings conflict to situations, others will not want to interact with her or will interact with her badly.

When a person is listening to another individual, he or she normally “attends” to the other person by looking at least in his direction and often making eye contact. There will also be some additional attending gestures such as head nodding or head tilting to indicate attention.

The listener may be day dreaming or totally focusing on what he or she is going to say next, but at least there is some attempt to look engaged in the conversation. There can be less overt ways a listener can show disinterest in the conversation. For example, the listener may start reading email on her phone or pick up a catalog and start leafing

through it. Another common ploy is to just put a blank look on her face and show no emotion or connection to the conversation.

Occasionally, you will run into an individual such as in the picture who has no intention of listening and tries to show it as graphically as possible. Here we see the woman actually blocking eye contact with her hand and making a sarcastic eye roll to enhance the signal. She clearly does not want to listen, and the situation between the two people has escalated to a point where she has no qualms about sending strong signals.

When a listener withdraws, it can be a clue that the person does not feel safe in the situation or with the person who is speaking. The body language is defensive and may be a way of protecting the person from harsh or demeaning words.

Another reason for withdrawal may be that the listener knows from experience that the interchange will not be positive or productive. Negative interchanges can have longterm repercussions.

Whatever the outward signal, if the listener is showing little interest in the input, it is best to think broadly about why you are getting this behavior or just go mute. As long as you are droning on, the listener is free to show absolutely no interest in what you have to say. Keep in mind that what the other person wanted you to do in the first place was shut up, so the awkward silence may get extremely long. If the speaker is one who creates conflict and the listener wants to avoid it, there is probably nothing the listener can say that will be accepted by the speaker, so the listener has no real incentive to say anything.

One thing to avoid is saying something like "Why don't you look at me when I am speaking to you?" A question like that can be interpreted as threatening. The same problem occurs with talking louder or faster. These actions will not remedy the situation, and they can even make the situation worse.

Situations like this point to larger or ongoing problems that have resulted in a lack of trust between people. The trust level needs to be addressed before open and meaningful communications can begin. It is wise for both people to think back on the progression of the relationship that brought them to this point.

Either person can act to improve the situation. Either can say, "It seems like we are not communicating well. I don't want to be in conflict with you. What can we do to repair this situation?" However, if there is a persistent instigator of conflict, that is the person who has the most responsibility to repair the relationship and rebuild trust. The other person may have tried many things in the past to reach out or express herself, was shut down, and now has given up.

Each person needs to examine her contribution to the ongoing issues.

Obviously a good, constructive conversation requires that both parties participate roughly equally. If the speaker does not let the listener respond, it is not a real conversation and creates a breach of trust. If the listener withdraws from the beginning, even if it is a result of prior bad experiences, it does nothing to heal the relationship.

Bilateral trust is vital for mature conversation. When you run into a situation like the ones described above, don't try to badger the other person into paying attention and if you are the person listening, don't withdraw. Work through the issues that you have. Investigate what may be causing the issues, talk it through, and try to rebuild trust. It can take time, but reestablishing an environment of trust is well worth the effort for both people and the entire organization.

*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.*