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Evasion

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When we were kids, and our mother asked us if we ate the chocolate chips, we would squirm and look away.

Our mother would say, “Look at me when you answer.” Of course, Mother could tell by the chocolate stains all over our lips that we had done it. We did not want to “get in trouble,” so we tried to evade rather than answer the question with a bold

face lie.

Let’s start the discussion with a realization that not all evasive actions are the result of something sinister going on. There are plenty of times when it is improper, illegal, or unkind to answer a question directly. Being evasive is not always a bad thing. It is highly situational and also highly personal having to do with the trust level between individuals.

For example, the question may come up relative to a rumor of a personal nature that needs to be kept private. It might be the result of a leak about a merger, where a direct answer would result in possible incarceration.

The rest of this article deals with a situation where an individual tries to get out of a tight spot by avoiding a direct answer to a question. Usually this condition is easy to detect, if you know the gestures and are alert to them. We used these moves as children, but in reality, they are practiced all of our lives.

The adult version of evasion goes on daily in organizational life and in many situations regarding public officials. If they are asked a direct question that they do not want to answer, the evasion is completely obvious by looking at their shifty eyes.

A perfect example of this body language was recently provided by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, when he was asked on September 22, 2019 on camera by Martha Raddatz about a July 25th phone call between President Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine.

Martha asked the Secretary of State, “What do you know about those conversations?” Pompeo evaded, while lowering his chin, looking down, and shifting his eyes from side

to side, “So...you just gave me a report about an I.C., about a Whistle Blower complaint, none of which I have not seen.” He did not reveal during that interview that he was actually on the phone call. That fact came out a couple weeks later.

Secretary Pompeo undoubtedly had a reason for not sharing everything at that particular moment on national TV. The point is that his body language made it obvious to people watching that he was evading or holding back something.

You also can see the evasive look in the eyes of CEOs who do not want to answer an embarrassing complaint brought up by an employee in a Town Hall meeting. You can witness it when a school board president tries to duck a question about some reported missing funds.

It is really a common human reaction when we get caught with our hand in the cookie jar to attempt to deflect attention in the hope that we can avoid having to admit the awful truth. Yet, in being evasive, we clearly lower trust and make it more difficult for people to believe us when we do ‘fess up to something.

In fact, the evasive gesture is so common that many of us just let it slide by and do not recognize we are getting at best a partial truth. You need to be alert to catch it because it goes by so quickly.

Look for this gesture when an individual is asked a direct question and hesitates before answering it. Particularly, watch the eyes to see if they are shifting back and forth or looking sidewise. Also, watch the chin to see if it is lowered slightly.

When you see these two gestures along with a long hesitation in answering a direct question, it is likely the person is being evasive. Once you suspect that, you can probe carefully to find out what the person is trying to cover up.

Rather than take an accusatory stance by saying something like, “Okay, what are you trying to hide here?” give the person some leeway, but try to share the rationale and make the probe a positive thing. For example, you might say, “It is vital that we know what was going on with Jake if we are to be successful at helping him, so I would appreciate you being candid about what happened.”

This is a time to use your Emotional Intelligence to manage the specific situation well to obtain a positive outcome. The objective should be to come away from the conversation with an enhanced level of trust between you and the other person.

The specific approach will vary widely based on numerous factors, such as the incoming level of trust between you and the other person, the reason for trying to evade, the number of other people involved and their relationships. It is not the intent of this article to cover every possible scenario and give advice. The idea is to recognize the body language associated with evasion and be alert for it.

If the person does open up with more information, you can then reinforce the behavior with some kind words like, “Thanks for leveling with me on this, Mike. I know it was not easy for you to do it.” If an assurance of confidentiality about this issue in the future is appropriate, then state that as well.

In many cases it is possible to transform an evasive action into a trust-building exchange if you handle it well, depending on the circumstances and the relationship between you and the other person.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language” by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.”