

Body Language 98

Head Shaking While Talking

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



There is an interesting form of body language that some people do while they are talking. It is moving their head from side to side. I am not sure what the origin is, but I see it in some commercials where people are advertising a healthcare service.

My guess is that the gesture is intended to make the person speaking seem to be more believable or genuine. It may be interpreted as being sincere, as in saying, “We are going to

take good care of your mother.”

The gesture can also be observed when people eat particularly delicious food. I suppose the meaning is, “I can’t believe how good this Key Lime Pie tastes.”

You also see the gesture used in politics, particularly by female politicians. Two people I have seen do this on numerous occasions are Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton. It seems incongruous because, for most people, moving the head from side to side is thought to mean “no,” but these women use it to appear more credible.

The gesture is also commonly used to convey disbelief. If someone is telling you a tall tale about how he ate two gallons of ice cream in one sitting, you might be shaking your head slowly from side to side in disbelief. Remember the old adage, “never eat anything bigger than your head.”

The gesture, as with many other parts of body language, is culture specific. There are some cultures where the gesture is seen much more often than in the USA and with a different meaning. For example, in some southern European Countries such as Albania or Bulgaria, the gesture means “yes” rather than “no.”

Another interesting observation is that when babies are hungry for breast milk, they nod their heads up and down, but when they want to reject the breast milk they move their heads from side to side. Of course, babies do not have the cultural programming for gestures that come along later in life.

Another variant of the side to side head gesture is the Indian or South Asian Head Bobble. Here the head does move from side to side but it sort of rocks or tilts back and forth on top of the neck. In these cultures, the gesture is very common, and it can mean different things based on the context. One common meaning is, "I understand." Another meaning can be, "Thank you." If done slowly and with a slight frown, it often means, "I respectfully decline."

Look for the head shaking gesture, and when you see it, look for other clues, such as the configuration of the mouth or the position of the eyebrows. These secondary clues can help you determine the true meaning of the gesture in that instance. Of course, the context of what is going on also will give you valuable insights.

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