

Body Language 99

Overacting

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Ideally, body language should be a natural form of communication that is mostly unconscious. Some people put too much energy into their body language, and it comes across as insincere and phony.

When you try to impress people with overt gestures, they will often become suspicious, and it lowers trust between yourself and other people. I will describe how overdone body language impacts us in several areas,

starting with the entertainment world.

Entertainment

Consider the movie, “Dumb and Dumber.” The two principle characters (played by Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels) constantly overdid their gestures and body language to the point where it became laughable. Actually, by the time the movie was half over, I was already tired of the humor.

When you think about it, many comedians make their living out of exaggerating gestures to the point of absurdity. A good example would be Kramer on the Jerry Seinfeld program. The phenomenon is not confined to the entertainment industry, it can occur in our professional and family lives.

Professional and Family

In the real world, overacting will get you into trouble because whenever you are forcing gestures, you are subject to sending mixed signals. Even if you try to have all your body language in the same direction, you run a high risk of confusing people. In doing so, trust is compromised.

You know some people in your professional circles who have broad sweeping gestures trying to make an impact. We also can experience some family members that use exaggerated body movements to punctuate drama. This tendency is also seen in some meeting environments where the stakes are particularly high.

Be your authentic self as much of the time as you can and let your body language flow naturally. Trying to force gestures in order to impress others or create some specific reaction in them, you inevitably sacrifice your own credibility.

How to Improve

One way you can hone your skill at using only natural and free-flowing gestures is to be a conscious observer of other people at all times. Look for signs of inconsistency in body language. As you become more adept at spotting the problem in others, you will naturally tend to do it less in your own case.

Try to catch yourself in the act of putting on a show in order to drive a specific reaction. Then block yourself from making the false signal. If you do it well and prevent yourself from sending mixed signals, then praise yourself for the growth you are experiencing.

Another way to grow in this dimension is to ask someone who is close to you to point out when you are being incongruent. Be sure to reinforce the person for sharing his or her reaction so you encourage more of that kind of candor in the future.

Studying Emotional Intelligence is another way to become more consistent. As we gain more knowledge of our own feelings and emotions, we can begin to see opportunities to modify our appearance to be indicative of how we are really feeling.

Overacting is a common problem in our society at all levels. Work to become more aware of any possible mixed signals you might be sending, and you will enhance the level of trust you experience with others.

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