USING BODY LANGUAGE TO ASSIST YOUR WORK

Wouldn't it be great if you could read your co-workers intentions? Wouldn't it be neat to know in advance if the next person approaching you is hostile? How would you like to know if people are interested in what you have to say? Wouldn't you like to know the next time someone may be deceiving you?

Reading body language is a skill. Like any other skill in life to get good at, it requires practice. With practice you too can get good at reading body language, which can offer a multitude of advantages at work, at home, and elsewhere.

It has been well established by researchers that those who can effectively read and interpret nonverbal communication, and manage how others perceive it, will enjoy greater success in life than individuals who lack this skill.

HOW IS READING BODY LANGUAGE DEFINED?

It is a means of transmitting information, just like the spoken word except that it is achieved through facial expressions, gestures, touch, physical movements, posture, embellishments (clothes, hairstyles, tattoos, etc.), and even the tone and volume of one's voice. It does require that one be observant to detect "tells" (clues that our bodies give off). Consequently, it is inadequate to simply see the tell, but one must also understand what the tell means for any advantage in using the tell. Consider this: the human body is capable of giving off thousands of tells. Which ones are most important and how do we decode them?

The best place to start is to get baseline information about the person. Base lining in this context is defined as "observing a person's behavior when he or she is under normal, non-threatening circumstances." In other words, how does this person look, act and sound under normal conditions. This is valuable information because when people go off their baseline, there are usually reasons for this and we can usually figure out those reasons. To accomplish base lining simply observe and make mental note of what you observe. This may happen at social functions, meeting in stores, or at the workplace. Take note how they normally stand or sit, facial expressions, hand gestures, where their eyes look when asked a question, where their eyes look when answering a question, eye blink rate, how they sound when speaking, speaking tone, words per minute, speaking cadence, etc. Any and all information you can establish as baseline for that person.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR TRUTH IN BODY LANGUAGE?

All parts of the body give off information. Consequently, all parts of the body should be examined for tells and what they mean. As a beginning point, most body language experts would start with what's called the limbic system. The limbic system is something we all have in our brains, and it consists of numerous parts. What is significant is not where the limbic system is located or the parts names, but rather what the limbic system does. In the non-verbal world, the limbic system is

Body Area	Tells	What It Means	How It Can Help You
Upper Torso	Leaning away	Disagreement	If you're in a meeting and introduce a new concept, and people lean back – you now know what they think of your new idea.
Hands	Wringing hands (like washing your hands without water)	Nervousness, anxious, stressed	When a co-work or client hand wrings, it would be time to back off and allow the stress to dissipate.
Face	Tight lips	Hesitancy and secrecy	Tight lips suggest these people have more information to share, but are simply unwilling to share.
Feet	Direction of feet	Intentions	Where the feet point show the true intentions of the person, i.e., towards a door (wants to leave), towards a person (wants to connect with that person), etc.
Legs/Feet	Bouncing feet	Happy, confident	With a person in a sitting position and their leg crossed and the foot bouncing up and down indicates that person is feeling good about what they are hearing and seeing.

referred to as the honest brain. Consequently, it gives off a true response to information in the immediate environment. It reacts instantaneously, in real time, and without thought. Thus, it is the "honest" part of the brain. The rest of the brain is the non-honest parts of the brain. Those parts deceive and deceive often. An example of the limbic system would be if you are scared of snakes or spiders and you discover one 2 feet from you. The moment you see the snake or spider you will react (jump, scream, run, yell, etc.). This would be a limbic reaction (instantaneous, in real time, and without thought). These reactions are valuable as they are authentic. That is, they are an honest reveal of that person in that situation. There would be no deception involved as they don't have time to think about their reaction. It is only when we have time to think about our responses that we many times couch our response to "fit" the person/situation.

In my body language training, I examine multiple tells and their meaning in the western culture. The following table will give you a good starting point:

DETECTING LYING & DECEPTION

This may sound strange coming from a body language expert, but determining if a person is lying or being deceptive through body language is inadequate. Don't get me wrong; we can get some wonderful tips and clues through body language but to detect lying and deception a couple other features are required. In my training on detecting lying and deception, I refer to the features as a three-pronged approach. One is body language, another is the science of lying, and lastly is what I call content and structure. When all three parts are working in concert, you now have the best chance of detecting lying and deception.

Body language we have already touched on. The science of lying is a body of knowledge that researchers have captured and documented on; why people lie, the types of lies they tells, the frequency of lying, the type of damage done by lying, and the mental gymnastics that liars go through, etc.

The content and structure part relies on a person responding to questions you have asked. What comes out of their mouths is content and the way they structure the con-

tent is very important. Example: when I was a high school principal in Wisconsin a rock was thrown through a window. Two teens were sent to me, each one accusing the other of being the rock thrower. After a couple minutes of asking certain questions, watching their reactions, and listening to their content and structure, I knew who the rock thrower was.

A more high profile example of this would be Susan Smith, the South Carolina woman who in 1994 drove her car into a lake and killed her children. She had told the police her vehicle was abducted by a single African American man at a stop light. When she addressed the media she would plead, "Oh I need my babies back!" But never once was there a tear. As she spoke she said, "I just can't stress it enough that we just got to get them back home. Where . . . that's just where they belong, with their mamma and daddy." Notice in her content and structure, she never referred to her children in the present tense. She referred to her children as "them." Her estranged husband on

the other hand got up to the microphone and referred to the children in the present tense and called them by name.

There is a strong human emotion that takes over when you lose a family member. It's called hope. You never give up hope until you know different. Susan knew different and it played out with her content and structure.

Research indicates that up to 93% of all face-to-face communication is non-verbal, yet very few are trained to observe "tells" and know what they mean when they spot them. As a professional that interfaces with humans, it would behoove you to address this much needed skill for the highest level success in the workplace. ■

Jerry Balistreri, B.S., M.S., M.Ed., ASTD Certified Trainer is a retired CTE educator and administrator. Jerry offers training on how to read body language and can be contacted at balis@acsalaska.net.