

Factsheet: Body Language

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What is Body Language?

Body language can be defined as:

Conscious and unconscious movements and postures made by people by which attitudes and feelings are communicated.

It is concerned with non-verbal communication.

People are generally unaware about how important body language is in their lives. Body language is an essential part of non-verbal communication whether we realise it or not.

Body language is closely connected with gestures – using motions of the limbs or body as a means of expression. Gestures are generally subconscious and occur without thought. They can be a powerful communication tool.

This Factsheet does not set out to try to explain everything there is to know about body language. It considers the importance of understanding body language and includes some guidance on what to look for, to better understand people through observation of their body language.

Body language is especially important to the internal audit profession, yet internal auditors often know little about it.

How Do You Learn About Body Language?

To learn about body language you can take the following actions:

- › Body language of others – Set aside time to sit in a place where people gather. Perhaps do this for 15 minutes each day while observing how people react and interact with each other.
- › Your own body language – Take time to acquire a conscious awareness of your own gestures (which we do without thinking).
- › Read about body language – A quick search of the internet will turn up books and articles on body language. This Factsheet has been informed by the book '*Body Language – How to Read Others' Thoughts and Gestures*' written by Australian body language expert Allan Pease. While written some years ago, it remains relevant to this day.

Body Language Gestures

The following examples are not intended to show the full range of body language gestures – it provides some examples as a brief guide to help you better understand what to look for. There are many examples of body language – some examples are shown below.

Arms Crossed

Gesture – Both arms crossed across the chest

What it suggests – Trying to hide from an unfavourable situation



Collar Pull

Gesture – A finger is used to pull the collar away from the neck

What it suggests – A lie has been told and the person telling the lie suspects they have been caught out





Ear Rub

Gesture – Listener rubs their ear or pulls their earlobe
What it suggests – The listener is trying to 'hear no evil' by 'blocking' the spoken words



Eye Rub

Gesture – Person speaking rubs their eye
What it suggests – The person is seeking to avoid looking at the face of the person to whom they are telling a lie

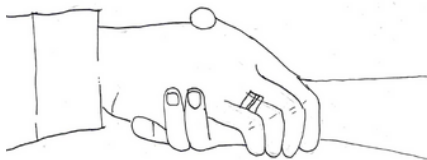
Eyes Looking Up To The Left

Gesture – Person looks up and to the left during a conversation
What it suggests – The person is trying to remember something



Eyes Looking Up To The Right

Gesture – Person looks up and to the right during a conversation
What it suggests – The person is creating an imaginary picture and might be lying



Hand Shake

Gesture – Dominant handshaker has palm facing down
What it suggests – Dominant person seeks to take control



Hands Behind Head

Gesture – Person sits back with both hands behind their head
What it suggests – The person is communicating they know everything and have all the answers

Lint Picking

Gesture – Person picks imaginary lint from their clothing
What it suggests – The person disapproves of the opinions and attitudes of others but feels constrained to give their point of view



Neck Scratch

Gesture – Index finger of the writing hand scratches the earlobe or side of the neck
What it suggests – A signal of doubt or uncertainty



Mouth Guard

Gesture – Hand covers the mouth with the thumb pressed against the cheek
What it suggests – If the person speaking uses this gesture, they are telling a lie – if the person listening uses this gesture, they feel the other person is telling a lie



Nose Touch

Gesture – Person speaking touches their nose with light rubs
What it suggests – If the person speaking uses this gesture, they are telling a lie

A Word of Caution

A body language gesture may indeed mean what is mentioned above – but it may not. A nose touch may indicate a lie has been spoken, but it may mean that the person has an itchy nose that needs scratching.

Information contained in this Factsheet is intended as a guide to reading the body language of other people. Body language can be misread and there are a number of reasons this can happen:

- › Age – Different generations may view body gestures differently and people from different age groups may present different body gestures. For example, a mature aged person may see a younger person with a slouching posture as inattentive when for the younger person it is about being in a comfortable position.
- › Culture – People from various cultures may use and interpret body gestures differently. For example, in some cultures eye contact shows attentiveness, while in other cultures eye contact can be viewed as disrespectful or threatening.
- › Personality – Not everyone is conscious of their body language. For example, a person may be making a body gesture without realising their action may be sending a message to someone else.
- › Personal Mood – A person's emotional state can affect both their body language and how they interpret others. For example, a person's mood may influence them to misread someone else's body language. Someone having a bad day might misread neutral gestures as negative.
- › Social Class – Body language may be read differently by people from different socio-economic backgrounds. For example, a person from a lower socio-economic background may read body language differently than a person from an upper-class or middle-class background.

Conclusion

The ability to 'read' body language is not a new concept. It is a skill used by people from many professional disciplines including sales / police / lawyers / negotiators / mediators. It can be a valuable attribute for internal auditors to enhance professional and personal relationships. It supports effective communication and interviewing techniques and also helps identify inconsistencies or discomfort that may not be verbally expressed.

While body language is an essential part of non-verbal communication, it is not the same for every person. Therefore, it is not wise to assume that your interpretation of another person's body language is always accurate.

Acknowledgements

This Factsheet has been informed by the book '*Body Language – How to Read Others' Thoughts and Gestures*' authored by Allan Pease.

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Useful References

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