

What Are They Thinking?

HOW TO READ AND RESPOND TO YOUR AUDIENCE'S BODY LANGUAGE

PATTI A. WOOD

Wouldn't it be great if you could get inside the minds of your audience and know what they are thinking about you and your presentation? Actually, you can—by reading their body language. Once you know what they're thinking, you can respond and have a successful presentation. Learning a few simple body language signals can help you discover the answers to the following questions.

Do they understand?

When audience members are confused, they will move in a random way, picking things up and putting them down. They will shift in their seats or shuffle their feet. Their brows may furrow and they may rub their eyes or face, typically downward as if they could clear their head of the confusion. Or they touch their temple or forehead, symbolically pushing the “on” button for their brain. Their eyes may blink open and close as if they hope they could see more clearly. Also look for cues that look asymmetrical, conveying “I’m a little off the mark.” They may tilt their head to the side, lean to one side, shut one eye and squint, or show one facial expression on one side of the face and another on the other side. If someone wants to ask a clarifying question but isn't sure it's safe, she may cover her mouth with her hand.

Are they bored?

Look for signals that show they have shut down or turned off. An audience member may

turn away from you or slump in the chair. Sometimes people will lean backward and lazily rest their arm around the back of the chair, or—in mock naptime posture—slump forward in their chair and lean or lie across the table. They may also put their head to the side or down, break eye contact, fix their eyes into space, or close their eyes for brief or even long periods. They may have a vacant look on their face because they aren't tuned in.

Are they frustrated, impatient, or ready to go?

If they have gone from boredom to irritation, there may be big hints that they want to move on to another point or are ready to leave the room, such as reading a newspaper or checking their watches or PDAs. If they are extroverted types such as salespeople, they may symbolically run from the room by crossing their legs and moving the dangling foot quickly up and down, jiggling the crossed-over knee, or tapping a foot.

Are they not buying in? Do they feel attacked? Are they defensive or angry?

Sometimes your message is controversial or difficult for an audience to take. If your audience is defensive, they will symbolically protect themselves by shutting down, getting away, or attacking. They shut down by crossing their arms, legs, or ankles or by tightening their lips into a thin line. They may grimace and cover their mouths with their hands. They

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When your audience “speaks,” be ready to interpret their language.

will “run” away by looking away, turning their head and upper torso away, or pointing their legs or feet toward the exit and exhaling quickly and loudly. They will symbolically attack by clenching the teeth, jaws, lips, or hands. They may square off the body to you in a confrontational way, putting their hands on their hips.

Are they resentful? Do they dislike you, your viewpoint, or the content?

If an audience feels injured or mistreated by you, your message, or the whole meeting, you may see them do the following: cross their arms, stiffen their back or limbs, grimace, look or turn away, or show the signs of anger mentioned above.

Do they doubt you or your claims? Do they think you're lying?

When someone is suspicious, he will look at you in a judging way. A suspicious person is trying to form an opinion. Her body shows her discomfort. Look for furrowed brows, squinting eyes, peering down, tilting the head, or

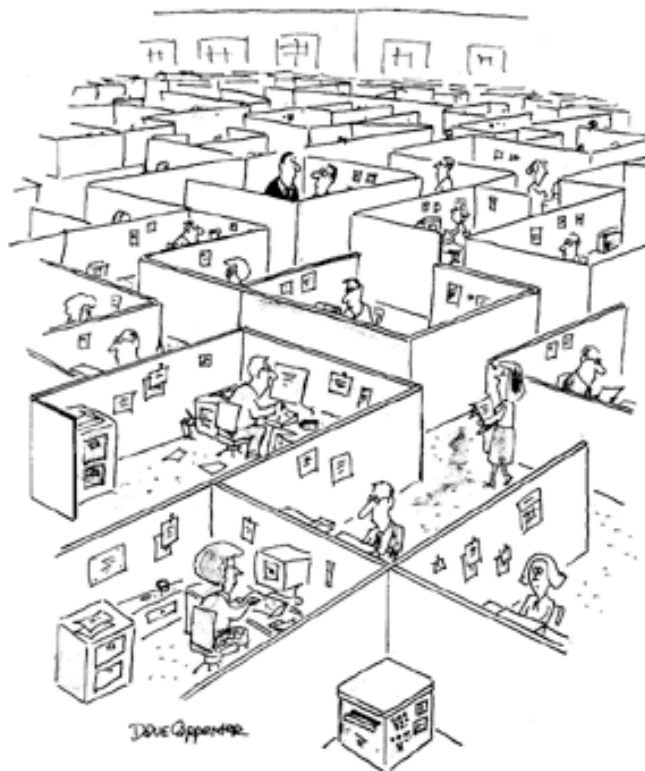
There may be big hints that they want to move on to another point or are ready to leave the room.

tightening the lips, as if to stop a disparaging comment. If the audience does not believe you, you'll see grimacing and exhaling through clenched teeth, head-shaking, or a tight smile masking their displeasure.

Do they get it?

When audience members are excited and happy, they fill up with those good feelings. Look for a sudden shift, usually upward, and a big inhalation; a shift in weight, usually forward; or a bouncing or rocking motion.

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“I've been able to keep my job all these years because the consultant couldn't find me.”

Are they interested and excited?

The audience signals their interest by smiling, tilting the head (to hear better), furrowing the brow in concentration but not with a pained look, and by leaning forward and blinking (with excitement so as not to miss anything). They are “up” for what you are saying, so their overall posture will be up and attentive as well.

The next time you speak, try these tips and see if you can read your audience. By understanding their body language, you can tweak your presentation and ensure its success. ■

INDEXED UNDER:

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PATTI A. WOOD (www.pattiwood.net) has over 20 years of experience researching and teaching nonverbal communication. She helps businesses such as AT&T, McGraw-Hill, Pfizer, and Nextel use body language to improve sales, productivity, and communication. She also has taught at the university level and has written several books on body language. An audio-cassette, “Body Language in Business,” is available through her website.

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