

Unit 3

How To Read Body Language Cues From Other Cultures

How can we make sure we're not inadvertently offending our multinational friends and colleagues? Here are some cultural cues you don't want to get wrong.

You might be comfortably in tune with body language and non-verbal cues of your own culture, but are you aware of the cultural *faux pas* you could be making when working overseas, or with multinational colleagues?

Appropriate facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms and degree of eye contact vary greatly across countries. Understanding these cultural differences will not only improve your working relationships but could make you more successful in managing increasingly globalised, multicultural teams.

In their book, *Body Language in a Week*, Geoff Ribbens and Greg Whitear go into detail about the ways being able to communicate with and respect other cultures is imperative to success in the workplace.

“Today, global integration and the ease of international travel is allowing people to move to countries that have different cultures and, as they live, work and integrate into the new societies, they create a diverse cultural richness,” they write. “To do business with other countries and cultures, you need to understand the basics of their cultural etiquette. Even people who do not conduct business in other countries, are working in increasingly diverse multicultural environments, where an understanding of the rudiments of accepted behaviour will be of value to establish rapport, manage and lead people.”

Personal Space

We all have a physical space or “personal bubble” that protects us from feeling uncomfortable. In Japan, it's common to have more of a physical distance when meeting others — not least to make room for the bow made during greeting. But this is very different from Latin American cultures which are more affectionate and happier to stand closer together.

“Always bear in mind that people will feel uncomfortable and possibly intimidated if you sit or stand too close to them,” write Ribbens and Whitear. “Similarly, they may find you cold and aloof if you maintain too much distance. The amount of personal space needed is derived from personal preferences and cultural norms. Unless you know otherwise, it is better to keep a respectful distance until you observe what is comfortable for the other person.

Silence

Western cultures tend to view silence as problematic and uncomfortable, a sign of inattentiveness or disinterest. In other cultures, however, silence is not viewed as a negative: in China, silence can be used to show agreement and receptiveness.

Head

In many countries, a nod of the head usually means “yes” and that you approve of something. But for Bulgarians and Greeks it can mean exactly the opposite, suggesting a negative response. In some parts of India, people tilt their head from side to side to confirm something and demonstrate that they are actively listening.

Eyes

Look someone in the eyes during a conversation in the USA, Australia, UK and western Europe, and you’re showing your respect for the speaker. Do the same in some Asian, African, and Latin American countries, however, and your unbroken eye contact could be considered aggressive and confrontational. These cultures tend to be more hierarchy-conscious and avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect for bosses and elders.

Hands

Handshakes can be fast such as in France, or much longer such as in China or in some Arabic countries. In Japan a “firm handshake” is viewed as inappropriate, whereas in the United States it’s seen as polite. In France, it’s possible to give a quick, light handshake in every professional and private context, while in the US and UK, handshakes are reserved mostly for professional situations. Be careful with hand gestures: the OK and thumbs-up signs can both be insulting in other cultures, as Ribbens and Whitear write:

“Facial gestures are fairly universal and have similar meaning in most parts of the world, especially expressions related to joy, fear and anger. Other gestures, especially those involving the hands, can have very different meanings in different cultures, so you are advised to avoid hand gestures until you have ascertained their meaning in the cultural context they will be used. For example, forming an ‘O’ with the thumb and forefinger means ‘OK’ (okay) in much of the world, but can also be a rude insult, depending on the regional and cultural context in which it is used.”

Arms

Used little by Nordics during conversation, arms are an indispensable element in the communications toolboxes of Italy, Spain, and South America. In some cultures, folding your arms across your chest appears standoffish and even insulting, but for certain countries like Sweden, “crossing your arms is a sign of listening”.

Legs And Feet

Be aware of your posture when you attend meetings or eat a meal. Sitting cross-legged is viewed as disrespectful in Japan, especially in the presence of someone older or more respected than you. Showing the soles of your shoes or feet can offend people in or from certain parts of the Middle East and India.