

## **Reading the Tells – Learning How to Read Body Language**

By Jerry Balistreri

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. This skill is no different. With practice you too can get good at reading body language which can offer a multitude of advantages at work and with family members.

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 (Goldman).

### **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 (Navarro).

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?

### **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 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 (Navarro). 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 (Vrij). An example of the limbic system would be if you are scared of snakes or spiders and you discover one two 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).

## What are some tells and what do they mean?

In my body language training, I will examine multiple tells and their meaning in the western culture\*. (There are too many nuances to share for all other cultures). The following table will give you a good starting point:

Body Area	Tells	What It Means	How It Can Help You & Your Students
Upper Torso	Leaning away	Disagreement	Once employed, the employee introduces 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 with their leg crossed and the foot bouncing up and down indicates that person is feeling good about what they are hearing and seeing.

## Summary

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. I look forward to seeing you at STMA Conference January 22 in San Antonio for a concurrent session on this topic.

## Bibliography

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Vrig, A. (2003) *Detecting lies and deceit: The psychology of lying and the implications for personal practice*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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