

People-Reading

Notes from my research into non-verbal communication for a coming work (2009)

By Tom Hoobyar

The best reading isn't in a book, it's our fellow humans -- you might even call us the best-seller of all time.

Every single human being you have ever met or will ever meet is a hidden treasure, just waiting to be discovered by someone with the right knowledge.

Each person is a First Edition, an Original; every one is unique.

And talk about convenient! They're everywhere. You can read people in all kinds of lighting, and enjoy them no matter what language they speak or whether they are across the room or right next to you.

And you can read them for free! People who cannot sense what is going on with others are going to have a rough time of it, in many ways throughout their lives. They are the ones who are always "out of touch".

You've been doing unconscious people-reading all your life, so getting really good at this will be easier than you think. You can practice anytime there are others to observe, and you can do it without bothering anyone.

During the time we spend on this subject I make this prediction:

IF you spend a little bit of time practicing this skill, you will never see others the same way again, and as you do the exercises I describe, your social success will begin to grow immediately.

That's because people WANT to be known. They might not know it, but it's true. People who can quickly understand others are fun and comfortable to be around.

When you start to show the slightest sensitivity to others you will jump to the top of their "welcome" list. You will be popular because you will be able to show respect for the real person behind the social mask.

Good people-reading is a polite form of "mind-reading", in a way. And when you get good at sensing what is really going on inside another person, you can become aware of their unspoken need. You can say the right thing, be helpful and understanding.

It's a way to really respect another person's uniqueness.

And that's magnetic.

We're going to start with a "big chunk" of people-reading that has a lot of usefulness.

When I say "big chunk", I mean a big idea. We're going to learn to notice a large pattern of behavior, instead of a "small chunk" behavior. We'll be taking up some "small chunk" pieces in a little later in this article. But first this big chunk.

Congruence and Incongruence

Have you ever been talking with a friend and somehow felt that you were not "in sync"? Perhaps they were even making pleasant statements, but you had the feeling that something was not going well with them, or between the two of you?

Or take another example. You're talking with a stranger, but you're not comfortable and don't know why. You just want to be away from them.

Or in a business situation where you're trying to get an agreement, and you're just not "getting through" to the other person, even though they say they get your point?

Or perhaps you're with a member of your family, and you sense that even though they say they're okay, something is wrong?

How about with a spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend, when they say everything's "fine" and you know you're in for a rough time?

Hah! We've all been there, my friend.

Wouldn't you like to catch the early signals before the deep freeze sets in, or the evening goes to ruin, or the business deal goes sour, or something just goes flat in the relationship?

Okay. Here's the secret.

We humans, all of us, are ALWAYS communicating, even when we don't intend to. And we notice a lot about each other, whether we are aware of it or not.

Communication isn't just talking -- it's much more than just the meaning of the words people use. We notice people's facial expressions, don't we? And their tone of voice? We can certainly tell the difference between someone who's shouting with joy and someone who's shouting in anger, can't we?

We get many impressions from people aside from the words they are using. Their expressions, tone of voice, posture, all of it blends to give us information about what's going on inside them.

Let's mix up some signals. For instance, you say something, and the other person says, "Yeah, right!" And you know from the tone of their voice they don't really mean "yes", they mean "no way".

How about someone who says pleasant things, only in a nasty tone of voice? Or perhaps it could be a person who says one thing, but with a facial expression that makes you doubt them?

You're not crazy. You've spent most of your life learning to notice little tiny clues - and now I'm going to explain it to you.

What I'm talking about is called "Congruence".

Like I said, people are always communicating, whether they intend to or not. They are making facial expressions and using various tones of voice as well as whatever words they choose.

Congruence means that people's facial expressions and tone of voice match what they are saying. When people are congruent, you believe them and are comfortable around them.

There's an old saying, "actions speak louder than words". That's right.

If someone's actions and words don't match, you become uneasy. And you should. Because something is going on with them, and you need to pay attention.

You are getting a signal that things are not as they appear with this person. Maybe they are uncomfortable. Maybe they are distracted. Maybe they are having feelings that they don't want to share. But something's not okay and you should be aware of it.

People will be congruent some of the time and incongruent at other times, depending on what's going on inside them. If you pay the right kind of attention, you will develop more trust in your "radar" and can act on it more confidently.

You will get sensitive enough to notice small incongruencies that another person may not even be aware of. That means you can deal with your companions with more understanding. And that will make you more popular and influential, beginning immediately.

So begin to pay attention to people around you. Notice when they are congruent and when they are not. You can also watch people on TV talk shows, where

you'll notice who is nervous, who perhaps is being insincere, and who is being really natural.

It can be instructive to watch TV with the sound off sometimes. You'll be surprised at what you notice from "listening with your eyes".

I urge you to spend some time polishing this skill of noticing when someone is congruent, and when they're not. It's valuable information that can help you to connect with those around you, and will serve as an early warning device when someone isn't really in tune with you.

And any time you are more sensitive to what is going on with another, you can be more helpful and understanding.

Don't you think this world could use a few more people like that?

Why not become one of them??

3 Small Chunks of Body Language

Now we'll go a little more deeply three chunks of body language just to give you something to observe and practice. Space requirements, eye language and smiles.

The best way to develop more skill in people reading is to keep one or two of the following Chunks in mind, and observe people around you as they go about their lives.

Watch how they use the space around them, how they use their eyes when meeting or talking with one another, their gestures and their touches.

These functions are universal and almost entirely unconscious. When people deal with someone who **mismatches** their culture's accepted rules of body language, they frequently dislike them without knowing why.

By being aware of these rules you can more easily understand the information you're gaining about your conversation partner, and note the degree of ease they are enjoying with you.

If they are not at ease you have more of a chance at working to increase their comfort. They will appreciate you for the effort, even if they are not aware of what you're doing.

Those who are really skilled in law enforcement, sales and counseling are good at reading and using these rules. The neat thing about becoming more skilled in

body language is that you can practice without anyone even knowing what you are doing – no risk!

I'm going to break these signals down into small chunks in each section, starting with the silent communication of posture and movement, then giving you some tips about the use of gestures and touches.

Space zone requirements

The different zones used by humans for various levels of acquaintanceship and intimacy are different from culture to culture and person to person. Many of the more unfortunate innocent mismatches and dislikes can be traced directly to the differences in space needs.

The best **general** rule to follow in North America is this:

Notice people's personal space zone and get inside 36 inches only by invitation.

Eyebrow flash

This is a quick eyebrow raise that signals a greeting and welcome. It happens in a fraction of a second, and it's used mostly to recognize someone you're acquainted with.

This signal is generally sent from more than six feet of distance. It's a good way to create rapport from across a room without having to shout or wave. It's like a silent salute of recognition.

Watch closely and you'll notice it in lots of situations. Observe strangers when they first notice someone they know at a distance.

You should initiate this gesture whenever possible – you probably already do it unconsciously and were not aware of it. If you do it you'll make people feel more kindly disposed toward you without knowing exactly why.

Always respond to another's eyebrow flash, unless you mean to signal hostility.

Practice this, and become familiar with its use by others. You'll notice the positive difference in people's response to you when you do.

Eye gaze

When you are greeting someone, generally hold the gaze about 3 seconds, then it's best to break the gaze downward. Then the gaze may be reestablished.

This is a very powerful form of communication. The timing of the gaze is culturally established.

Don't be worried about doing it wrong; you were trained in this body language from your infancy onward. If for some reason you were disadvantaged in this training, just observe what is normal for the culture you are wanting to fit into.

Most Europeans hold an initial gaze for about 3 seconds, break it for relief and to show respect, then reestablish it. If the initial gaze is held longer by this group, it signals either hostile or romantic intent, depending on the gender of the people involved.

There are different “unwritten” rules for Native American, Asian, Latino and Middle Eastern peoples. Every human – indeed every primate and many mammals do this. My best advice is, watch and learn what's normal for the group you're with.

Smile

There is very little you can do to increase people's comfort with you than by skillful use of your smile muscles. If you just give this section a little attention you'll find even casual relationships becoming a little smoother and easier.

You should match or slightly exceed your partner's smile. Avoid under matching or greatly overmatching smiles. Undermatching signals dislike and too much overmatching signals either an improper interest or an unusual inner state; perhaps confused, delusional, or incongruent.

Inappropriate smiles make us confused.

You can trick your body into being congruently welcoming of strangers by seeing them as if they were an old friend that you had a wonderful relationship with years ago, and had lost track of. Then they appear out of the blue – what a happy surprise!

Let that joy greet your new acquaintance. Make sure that you turn fully toward them and smile. Practice this slow spreading smile, increasing it as you get positive feedback from people.

You can create an immense attraction in others, both same and opposite sex, by the nature of this smile. It makes people feel extremely welcome in your presence.

Okay, that's it for now. There's a lot here to absorb. Go ye forth and practice and experiment – you can have a lot of fun with this because for most people it's “beneath their radar” - largely unconscious and out of their awareness. But, oh, what a difference it can make for you!