

People Reading

Increase Your Awareness of
Your Impact on Others



WHY TRY TO READ PEOPLE

Effective communicators aren't just skilled at listening and expressing themselves. They are also adept at recognizing the effect their communication has on others. They are able to read people's reactions – and often adjust the message to fit the audience.

People reading is not an easy task. The better you know a person, the more accurate you may be at understanding the subtle clues s/he sends out. The real challenge is realizing that those clues mean different things when you see them in different people. Crossed arms may mean someone is defensive or hostile. It's just as likely that they are a sign the person is cold – or simply more comfortable with folded arms.

Despite its pitfalls, people reading is still a skill to work on developing. Learning how to assess the impact of your message on others will decrease misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

TURN OFF THE AUTO-PILOT

Communication is usually an unconscious process. If you're like most people, you say and do things on auto-pilot. You don't spend a lot of time thinking about what you're saying and how others are responding to your message. The first step to being a more successful communicator is to make this process conscious and planned. Start that shift by observing others. Over the next couple of weeks, watch the communication that goes on around you. Don't just focus on the speaker in meetings – look at the listeners. See what subtle clues you can pick up that give you hints to their reactions. Watch television with the sound turned off and try to guess at how the listener is responding to what is going on.

BREAKING THE CODE

Think about what you do to read a book. When you first pick it up and look at the cover, your brain starts to make assumptions. You then might scan the blurb on the back to get an idea of what's inside. You're now forming expectations. When you actually start to read, your brain goes through a complex series of decoding actions. It works to decipher what the grouping of letters – all those squiggly lines – mean when they're put together in certain configurations. The groups of words form sentences and paragraphs and pages that, if we can decode them correctly, begin to make sense. If we're reading a simple book on a topic we're familiar with, this process is fast and effective. But think about what goes on if you try to read a big fat textbook on a topic totally foreign to you. Imagine how successful you'd be if the book were written in Greek or Lithuanian. All of a sudden that automatic decoding process has become almost impossible. Your brain has to work extra hard.



Reading people is even more difficult. It doesn't matter where you read the word "cat" – it could be in a book, a cartoon, a newspaper article or a billboard – you know what "cat" means. There are no universal rules when you're reading people. A gesture or sound from one person will mean something completely different in another. To increase your people reading skill, you need to become more aware of what's going on inside your own head.

YOUR BRAIN IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

Just as your brain made assumptions and created expectations about that book you're holding, it has assumptions and expectations of the people you encounter. Most human beings are convinced that they are neutral and objective observers of facts. The reality is whatever you see is filtered through your brain. Your perceptions are affected by the situation, your relationship with the person involved, your life experiences, your personality, your mood, your biases, and countless other sneaky factors. The impressions you form about others influence how you read and anticipate their reactions to you. Your impressions also affect how you interpret what others say and do.



THE CASE OF THE MISSING PEN: You notice Clarence walking away from your desk, carrying your favorite pen. How you react depends on your impression of Clarence. If you like him and see him as a warm-hearted but somewhat absent-minded guy, it won't be a big issue. But if you see him as an uncaring, thoughtless jerk, you might react by running after him, yelling, "Stop, Thief!" It's the same incident involving the same people – but your reaction grows out of your perception of Clarence.

This process is complicated by something called the "self-fulfilling prophecy." Your brain has decided Bertha is cold and hostile. Now every time she gets a little quiet, you take it as more proof she's just an angry person. Bertha senses your feelings toward her which affects her willingness to be open and friendly with you. Now she gets even quieter, which your brain interprets as more evidence validating its impression. And so it goes . . .

THE SECOND WAY YOUR BRAIN GETS IN THE WAY

There is a second way your brain interferes with the people reading process. When you say something, your brain knows exactly what you are trying to communicate. It has the whole context. So when it comes to evaluating communication, your brain tends to focus on the intent of the message – what you mean to say. Too many of us operate on the inaccurate assumption that other people have the same inside information about our intentions and motives that we do.

Unfortunately, other people don't have the benefit of this hidden purpose. They just feel the impact of the words and how they are said. A supervisor who says, "*Your being late again just shows how irresponsible you are*" may be trying to change a negative pattern of performance. The employee who hears that message just feels attacked and immediately responds defensively.

CLUES TO ASSESS THE IMPACT

The worst place to look for evidence of your impact on others is inside your own head. You need to step outside yourself and focus on the other person. Watch closely. Don't just listen to their words. Look at what they're saying with their bodies – gestures and body movement. Pay close attention to changes in the face, particularly the forehead, eyebrows and lips. Listen for all the qualities of the voice (tone, speed, volume, inflection). *Yeah, I'd really like to help you with that* is a completely different message depending on how the words are said.

HAVE A NICE DAY: The muscles around the eyes are very hard to control. They contract when a person really smiles, causing the eyes to crease and the eyebrows to drop slightly. If a person is faking a smile, her face will be flatter and the eyes are not crinkled. Note the difference between these two faces. Which one is the “real” smile? Genuine smiles are usually brief and fade after a few seconds. Pretend smiles last much longer.



When you're observing non-verbal communication, don't over-emphasize any one aspect. Look for patterns of clues. Instead of just noticing that Gladys crossed her arms, sense the amount of energy being put out. Did she tense up at the same time she crossed her arms? Did her facial expression change? Was there a shift in her tone of voice? Did she start looking in a different direction?

Watch for signals that the other person is “still there.” Someone might remain quiet while you're talking but his mind has wandered elsewhere. Monitor for that telltale glazed-over look in the eyes. Look for dropped eyes or repeated glances around the room. If you keep on talking when you see those signs, be aware you're probably talking to yourself.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTION

Increasing your awareness of others' reactions is a start on being better at people reading. Remember that your observations give you a set of **assumptions**. There is no guarantee that your guesses about the person's reactions are accurate. The only way you can know is to check them out. Rather than continuing to talk in hopes of winning someone over, stop and say “*you seem distracted*” or “*it looks like you need some time to think about this.*” Read the clues and then **ask**. This action is especially important when there you're getting mixed messages with the words saying one thing and the body saying another. Make a simple observation and then ask about it. You can use statements like: “*You said you'd like to help, but your voice tone suggests you don't really want to do it. Which message is the right one?*” or “*You nodded your head that you understand but you still look confused. Would it help you if I explained it another way?*”