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Non-Verbal Cues

Part 2: Posture and Space

In the March/April issue we discussed the non-verbal cues in general terms and the role of the subconscious mind in making observations. When our conscious mind drifts to another topic, the subconscious mind is still monitoring the situation and looking for clues in a passive way. From this subconscious monitoring we get “a feeling that something is wrong” or a sense of “I just don’t trust him,” but not a specific behavioral clue that supports the feeling. Conversation also can develop a subtext, or unspoken words and feelings that are expressed by behavior alone.

The guilty are in a unique situation, as their body undergoes the psychological and physiological changes of fight or flight as they face a dangerous situation. Panic and uncertainty reign the day. They are thinking, “What should or shouldn’t I do? Flee or stay and fight the battle?”

From the last column we noted:

One can easily imagine the inner conflict as the emotional side of the brain votes to flee while the rational side elects to stay. This conflict results in unconscious clues to the inner dialog of the subject as the two hemispheres with different skills collide.

Internal conflict resulting from the basic desire to flee or fight increases tension and anxiety within the individual. In an interview the basic problem for the guilty is two unpleasant choices—try to run and it brings attention and suspicion, or stay and face a decidedly unpleasant conversation. It is only when this conflict is resolved that the person is able to reduce the anxiety and make the choice to confess.

We now have established a context for the subject’s observation of the interviewer and his verbal and nonverbal behavioral cues. The subject has to make a difficult decision—“Am I caught?” In part this decision will rest on the behavior of the interviewer. Remember, the interviewer who tries too hard to convince the subject his guilt is known will not be trusted. If the subject perceives the value of his confession is important to the interviewer, the price for it will go higher, making it more difficult to obtain. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors indicating neediness or pleading will be recognized and rebuffed by the subject, making a confession more difficult to obtain.

The interviewer must present a confident, balanced appearance visually, one that subconsciously supports his words and strategy chosen. The interviewer should select and maintain an open appearance with arms and legs uncrossed. The trunk of the body should be leaning slightly forward toward the subject with the arms in a comfortable and relaxed position.

Clearly, while the interviewer has the uncertainty and pressure of the case closure, he must appear comfortable and certain of his position in the eyes of the subject. If the interviewer sends contradictory signals to the subject, it is likely the individual will at least unconsciously recognize the discord of this behavior and feel uneasiness about the conversation. This may be enough for the conscious mind to begin to actively search the interviewer’s words and actions for the source of his discomfort.

Carefully constructing a positive and negative spatial arrangement allows the interviewer to express many thoughts that need not be expressly stated. The mind recognizes the meaning and subtext being communicated by the interviewer.

Selecting the proper distance from the subject is another consideration for the interviewer. Personal space was first described by Edward Hall in the 1950s where he addressed peoples’ use of space in the environment and during conversations. An interviewer should consider the subject’s preferences and gender when selecting a complementary distance to sit from him or her. For most people this will be three to four feet of separation between the trunks of their bodies. The space between the interviewer and subject becomes shared space with both parties using it to make gestures. Interestingly, this space is much more useful to the interviewer since the guilty tend to lock their body down, taking a rigid appearance.

The interviewer is now free to assign meaning to space in various parts of the room. The interviewer uses this space

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to attach meaning to his words, as a sort of subtext to the conversation he is having with the subject.

The assignment of space is not rigidly done the same way by all interviewers. It should be a natural place the interviewer feels comfortable gesturing to when talking about something positive and negative. Consider spatially where negative feelings are kept. For many people, negative feelings and emotions seem to spatially be off to the side and slightly behind them. People may find there is a natural gesture to this position as they address negative feelings and emotions. In the same way positive feelings may be felt or sensed directly in front of a person. Regardless, where you may personally store these positive and negative feelings naming the space for the subject can be useful in creating a subtext to the conversation.

For the purpose of this discussion, we will position the “negative” or bad place to the right and slightly behind the interviewer and the “positive” or good place directly in front of him.

The interviewer must identify the location of the positive and negative space for the subject if it is to be useful. There is no need to do this explicitly, “Over here is the bad place and this is the good spot. When I gesture here, the subtext is something bad.” This might only cause the subject to wonder about the interviewer’s sanity.

Rather, the issue of space is assigned during the natural course of the conversation. It is the repetition of

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the interviewer’s gesture pored with the context of the conversation which gives the space an identity in the room.

For example, as the interviewer talks about a bad reason for committing a crime he gestures to the right and slightly behind him as he expresses disbelief a person could act that way. Later, he might gesture with both hands as though throwing away garbage in the bad place to the right and behind him. In another instance, he may stretch his arm into the space while speaking of something negative. The end result of these gestures is a subconscious naming of the space for negatives.

For the alternative, the interviewer holds the positive space in his hands directly in front of himself as though holding an item he is proud of and showing off. This also sets the interviewer in a frame of reference as being in a positive position, since the subject looks through the good space into the eyes of the interviewer.

While neither space has been explicitly named, the interviewer has created a subtext of positive and negative that will be recognized just by his gesture to either area. Once the space has been labeled, the interviewer can talk about an idea or solution, giving it a positive or negative connotation, just by his gesture. The interviewer does not have to say the actual words; he must only perform the gesture to indicate his feelings. In the event the interviewer recognizes he is using a wrong rationalization with the subject, he gestures to the bad place and says, “Many people just couldn’t understand that.” And he has discarded it.

Imagine a gesture that can hold something up to adoration or relegate it to the trash dump. Would that be useful?

How about when presenting a soft accusation as in the following example.

Interviewer: “Bob let me ask you, what is the most amount of money you took at any single day?” (Hands to the good place.)

Follow up question, “It wasn’t over a thousand dollars, was it?” (Gesture to the bad place.)

Subject: “No.”

Interviewer: “Great, I didn’t think so!” (Hands to the good place.)

Carefully constructing a positive and negative spatial arrangement allows the interviewer to express many thoughts that need not be expressly stated. The mind recognizes the meaning and subtext being communicated by the interviewer. “I really think highly of her” might tell another tale if the gestures were included. ■

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