

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:

How To Read What's Plain as the Nose...or Eyelid...or Chin...on Their Face

by Mac Fulfer



Why does corporate America have so many meetings that take a lot of time yet accomplish so little?

Think back to the last company meeting you attended. No doubt most, if not all, eyes were on the speaker, heads were nodding and shaking at all the appropriate times, but little was actually settled. Why? The reason is because the speaker did not have any genuine communications between himself and his audience.

Although communication is most often thought of as the written or spoken word, it is much more. In fact, it is impossible not to communicate. Whether we realize it or not, we communicate without words every second and with each passing thought. Often, the most reliable information is not what comes from someone's mouth, but what is exposed in the form of subtle clues and cues that reveal the person's true feelings. But even the stoniest, most expressionless façade can speak volumes to someone who is adept at reading faces. Let's sit in on

a typical meeting and find out how.

LEARNING TO HEAR WHAT IS NOT SAID

Everyone arrives by 9:00 a.m. carrying their coffee cups. The president opens the meeting by

For most people, "reading" others' nonverbal messages is an intuitive, "gut" process. But learning to do it consciously and deliberately can enhance understanding and thus greatly improve interpersonal relations in a wide variety of situations. At work, it can be a useful tool to facilitate decision making and ease work processes – for example, during interviews or at meetings.

explaining that the purpose is to discuss some old business and the feasibility of taking on a new product line with a new marketing plan. When he finishes making his comments, he turns the meeting over to the vice-president of marketing who begins his pitch. All eyes are on the vice-president. Most of the attendees wear either a neutral or pleasant expression and as the VP speaks their heads nod in agreement. Well prepared with color

charts and graphs, the speaker believes he is really driving home his point. But to the trained eye, the apparent agreement of the pleasant expressions, nodding heads and seemingly focused attention gives way to the underlying facts which reveal a much different picture.

Bob, the vice-president of sales, is very suspicious of the merits of the proposal and wants additional proof that it will work. His bottom eyelids speak louder than words.

Susan, the sales manager, has never liked the VP of marketing and mistrusts anything he says. While a smile never leaves her lips, her face screams out to the educated observer, "I don't trust him as far as I could throw him." He could have gained her trust if he had recognized what her eyelids were saying.

When the subject of project deadlines comes up, Angie, the human resource manager, becomes so stressed out that she can't hear another word being said, even though her head continues nodding without missing a beat.

Bill, the warehouse manager, is sitting back in his chair; his face, expressionless. But a real communicator would have picked up on his pumping jaw muscles and flaring nostrils – signals that he is suppressing so much anger that he is emotionally numb and exhausted. Jim, the regional sales director, has some great insights that would clarify some of the problems, but he won't share them because he has decided to withhold his acceptance of the proposal being presented. The position of his index finger over his lips is proof of his true yet unspoken feelings.

Meanwhile, Sally, assistant to the vice-president, is feeling angry and put out by having to be at this meeting. When asked by her boss if she would mind staying late to finish some reports, she rubs her left eye and says, "Okay". Although she never opens her mouth to protest, she is thinking, "I don't have enough time as it is, and now he wants me to do something else, too?"

As for Art, the quality control manager, red flags went up in his mind and he mentally left the room the instant the vice-president said, "This is the perfect product." If he understood the meaning of Art's downturned mouth, he might have realized that a different approach would have generated a more receptive reaction.

The little voice in the head of Linda, the project and meeting planner, keeps saying "Why should I care? No one appreciates what I do

around her anyway." Her face itself, and not her expressions, reveal the source of her attitude.

Finally, Henry, the shipping supervisor, is subconsciously signaling that he has reached the information saturation point. He is not even aware of the way he is holding his face in his hand, but a face reader could easily tell that his mind was elsewhere.

***Are you always right about what you see on a person's face?
Is face reading an exact science?***

Face reading is not an exact science. It is more of a language or a tool for communication. It is not a perfect tool, but neither is my phone or computer. Just because my phone and computer don't always work doesn't mean I'm going to throw them away. Face reading works amazingly well most of the time.

We all have faces and we all share some common traits. After learning to read faces, the color of people's skin, their age, or this national origin is of no more importance in evaluating them than the color of the tie they may be wearing. You will notice instead. "Wow, he has ears just like mine," or "Those are just like my mother's eyes." And suddenly you realize there is a bond of recognition and acceptance for a person who before, appeared to have nothing in common with you.

Left unaddressed, these unspoken issues will doom the meeting to failure. The vice-president will leave believing that he delivered a great presentation and sure that everyone is ready to jump on board to implement his program. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

MAKING THE CRITICAL COMMUNICATION CONNECTION

What would have made this meeting a success? In a word, connection. Even the most brilliant ideas and plans will fail if no one signs on because the speaker is not connecting with the audience. Meetings often fail because people all bring with them a host of attitudes, preferences, styles, feelings, and unspoken agendas. That information is

written on their faces. If it is ignored or overlooked, the participants will become disengaged. It takes no complicated study to verify this fact. When people do not feel as though they are heard, valued, understood or appreciate, they internally shut down and tune out.

If our fictional vice-president had known how to read the faces of the people who attended the meeting, he could have connected with every person in the room. He would have understood what they were saying even though their mouths never moved.

Reading faces starts with the assumption that we are all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual beings. Additionally, every one of these aspects reflects the other. For example,

we know that being emotionally upset can affect a person's physical performance and/or mental concentration. Face reading takes the connection between these fundamental qualities to the next level. Attitudes, feelings and thoughts are reflected on people's faces in subtle ways that can be read even from across a room.

In the example above, Bob's wariness about the topic is revealed by his eyelids. When we open up to let in more information, a physiological response signals our receptivity: Our eyes open up to let in more light. A face reader would notice that the bottom eyelids (where the eyelashes are attached) become more round or curved when the

listener opens up. Conversely, when we become suspicious, wary, guarded, or judgmental, the bottom lids become straight or flat. If a listener's bottom lids form a straight line, regardless of how pleasant his or her expression, the person isn't buying what's being said. But that is only half the story.

LEFT BRAIN AND RIGHT BRAIN INFLUENCES

Science tells us that our left-brain sorts information by dividing the world into little monads of data that we organize into logical, linear sequences to produce a predictable result. In short, our left brain works something like a computer, where two plus two always equals four.

Conversely, our right brain is the source of nonlinear thought, including our feelings, intuitions, and even our creativity. It controls the spontaneous, artistic, and imaginative side of our personality our in-

My aunt has straight bottom lids. Are there some people who have straight bottom eyelids all the time?

Yes, there are people who appear to have permanently straight bottom lids. Natural shyness is sometimes revealed by straight bottom lids, for the bottom eyelids reflect the person's degree of openness. For some people, maintaining a wary, suspicious, guarded or judgmental attitude is a way of protecting themselves. But even straight bottom eyelids will soften or become more round when the person opens up or becomes more accepting. There is a very positive side to dealing with people with straight bottom lids. Once you gain their acceptance they are inclined to be some of the most loyal and faithful friends, partners, spouses or aunts you could ask for.

stincts and gut reactions are all important right brain functions.

But we are all cross-wired. The right side of the brain controls the left side of the body and the left side of the brain controls the right side. Therefore, for purposes of face reading, it is important to remember that the left side of the person's face reflects his or her personal feelings, personal preference, and challenges while the right side reflects the person's business or external world.

(Remember it is the subject's left and right side, not the viewer's.)

If a person's right bottom lid is the straightest, like Bob's in the above example, that means he has reservations about the subject and doesn't thrust the external informa-

tion he is being given. On the other hand, if the person's left bottom lid is the one that is the straightest, which was Susan's response, the person is wary, suspicious, or guarded on a personal level. She is really thinking, "I don't trust you."

An aware speaker armed with this information could, at the appropriate time, say something like, "Bob, you looked like you were having some doubts about this proposal, so I want to give you some of the market research

that supports it," or, "Susan, I want to confess that I'm suspicious of anyone who tells me to take their word for it, so I'm providing a list of references for anyone who wants to see how this product has worked for someone else."

With their concerns addressed, Bob and Susan will feel more respected and thus, connected. The fact that they never had to say what they were actually feeling increases that feeling of connection. The real power of face reading as a communication tool is its impact on the listener who feels understood without having to say a word.

READING EYELIDS TO SPOT TROUBLE

Spotting wary, suspicious, or judgmental attitudes does not require great eyesight or years of training, just a quick comparison of the eyelids in the room. When you are speaking, look around and notice the difference between the round or curved bottom eyelids in the room and the straight bottom lid. You may already be responding to your audience's response. For

Is there any danger to reading faces?

Face reading is not dangerous, but attitudes can be. My initial skepticism about face reading came from some of the early literature on physiognomy that was very judgmental. For example, I read that Charles Darwin almost didn't go to sail on the HMS Beagle because the captain thought he had a "lazy nose." Using face reading, or anything else for that matter, as the final determinant of a person is not just wrong: it's evil. As humans, we are all too wonderfully complex and mysterious to be labeled with any boxed-in-definition.

The danger of face reading lies in trying to make it more than it is. It is a communication tool. Using face reading to raise one's conscious awareness of another is only half the story. It is important to get feedback, as in, "You look like a natural communicator who likes to work with other people. Now this job is in a cubicle in the back room and you probably won't see or talk to anyone. Is this a problem?" Used in this manner, face reading not only works, but also creates a wonderful non-threatening dialogue that produces information about the other person that would otherwise be overlooked.

example, you may find it easier to look at the people with the round lids as you speak. However, the people with the straight or flat bottom lids are the ones who most need your attention.

The ability to spot pockets of resistance within a group gives the speaker a valuable tool. If left uncovered, wary, suspicious and

you have some questions about this proposal. What would you like to add?"

The exciting part about reading the eyelids of the audience is that bottom eyelids give a constant data printout. The bottom eyelids automatically vote on the speaker's every word. They become more curved to signal emotional acceptance and

The Author's Experience with Face Reading

As an attorney, I was skeptical when I first heard about face reading. In researching the topic, I discovered that it was not a New Age fad. Aristotle wrote about the subject more than 2,000 years ago and it has had a following throughout the ages. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare were versed in physiognomy, the scientific name for face reading.

Practicing law for over 20 years had turned me into a skeptic with a downturned mouth. Before I would believe in face reading, I had to verify it for myself. My approach was pragmatic: If it doesn't work for everyone, throw it out. After reading and researching all the information I could find on the subject, I spent every weekend for two and a half years setting up "Face Reading Guaranteed" signs at practically every art festival, Oktoberfest, round-up and craft show in the state of Texas.

I read thousands of faces, applying the knowledge I had gained in my research and at the fairs. My guarantee was "If my reading isn't correct, you don't have to pay." The purpose at the festivals was not to make money, but to do the research I needed to validate the use of face reading for jury selection. I changed my sign to "Amazing Face Reading" because that was the response I most often heard: "That is amazing, how did you do that?" In the boxes throughout this article are my answers to some of the most common questions I've been asked about face reading.

instantly flatten or go straight to indicate wariness and non-acceptance. Regardless of whether the person's bottom lids are naturally curved or naturally flat, they are involved in a constant dance that reflects each listener's internal response.

judgmental attitudes can later, during the inevitable water cooler conversations, sabotage the purpose of the meeting. Having the opportunity to defend one's position out in the open with the very people who are questioning it can eliminate controversy before it starts. Instead of avoiding the gaze coming from over flat bottom lids, an effective approach is to address the person with the straight bottom lids by saying, "You look like

Even the straightest bottom lids will become more curved when the person opens up and becomes more receptive. If you look around the room and all bottom eyelids are straight, you're facing a very tough crowd. In this case, a little levity might help lighten things.

SCANNING THE WINDOWS OF THE SOUL

Eyes truly are the windows to the soul. Angie's eyes are a dead giveaway for the stress she is ex-

periencing. When we experience stress, the physiological response is for our eyes to float up, revealing the white of the eye below the iris (the colored part of the eye). It is easy to spot the white showing even from a distance.

The left eye and right eye will reveal different information. If there is more white showing beneath the iris in a person's left eye, he or she is experiencing personal stress, including possibly feeling physically ill, or is having an emotional stress response to the people or circumstances in the immediate environment. If the right eye has more white showing, it is more likely that the stress is connected with the external or business aspects of the person's life.

It is important to remember, however, that it is not what the speaker is saying but rather, what the listener is thinking that causes the stress response. For example, if the topic of project deadlines comes up and the whites begin to show in Angie's eyes, you cannot jump to the conclusion that she is stressing out about the deadline. She could be having random thoughts. She might be trying to remember if she locked her car or put money in the parking meter.

A savvy presenter would take note of the stress showing in Angie's eyes and drop the topic of deadlines to see whether Angie's eyes returned to normal. If they do, but immediately begin showing stress when deadlines are brought up a second time, there is a much stronger correlation. If this response is repeated a third time

after the topic is dropped and resumed, Angie's stress is probably stemming from the deadline.

To connect with Angie, the speaker might say, "I understand that some of you may be feeling stressed about these deadlines and I would be happy to discuss that issue before this meeting is over."

LOOKING FOR SIGNS OF SUPPRESSED ANGER

Pumping jaw muscles (Ripples under the skin) often indicate suppressed anger. The anger may be concealed and kept under tight control, but like a sleeping volcano, when folks with pumping jaw muscles finally erupt, their temper may be explosive. Flaring nostrils indicate a more immediate response. Both indicate the person's coping mechanisms may be stretched to their limit.

During the meeting, Bill may not even realize he is suppressing anger, but the unconscious movement in his jaw muscle gives a deeper insight. And his flaring nostrils telegraph that he is set to go off. The energy required to maintain his self-control can leave him numb or exhausted by the end of the meeting.

The pressure of bottled up feelings can be devastating, so giving a person the opportunity to open up in a safe and private space is crucial.

Bill may ever ask for help, but he needs connection. He could use a friend with a sympathetic ear and the patience to listen. His pump-

ing jaw muscles signal that he has a need to be in control, especially of his own emotions.

How does the white showing in a person's eye prove they are experiencing stress? Don't some people have medical conditions that make the whites show all the time?

Yes, there are some people whose eyes show white around the iris all the time. If I saw someone like that and they looked otherwise calm and normal, I would discount that trait and not read it. What I notice is when the eyes change and suddenly begin to show white. The stress response is marked by the change.

There are some medical schools that teach doctors to look for the "sanpaku" response, where the whites show on three sides of the iris as an indicator of potential violence. The term "sanpaku" is a Japanese word referring to a condition where the person flies into a homicidal rage.

READING GESTURES AND OTHER SIGNALS

Sometimes actions, especially unconscious ones, do speak louder than words. A quick glance at Jim shows he is listening, but with his thumb under his chin and his extended index finger pressed to his lips. This gesture and the gesture of covering the mouth with a hand or fist, signals that the listener is withholding acceptance or approval of

Aren't gestures affected by culture? How can you read gestures?

Yes, some gestures are culturally learned responses. For example, in some cultures, looking at someone with an extended gaze is considered rude. There are other cultures whose members are so very aware of the messages conveyed by the change in pupil dilation that they would not conduct serious business without wearing dark glasses. But not all gestures are cultural. Some are automatic and are truly universal expressions of emotion.

what is being said. From a non-verbal perspective, the listener is saying, "I don't trust what you are telling me, but I am keeping my

thoughts to myself." A connective response might be, "Jim, you look like you have some ideas. What are your thoughts?"

On the other hand, sometimes a cigar is just a good smoke. It is important to understand when gestures are acts of communication and when they are not. If Sally comes to the meeting rubbing her eyes, she just may have itchy eyes or allergies. If she begins to rub her eyes immedi-

ately after being asked, "Would you mind staying after work to finish up these last five reports for me?" even if her mouth says, "Yes," she may be thinking, "Why me? Why can't you finish up your own reports?" Eye rubbing often signals anger at the feeling of being put upon or unfairly burdened.

The key for understanding what is not being said is to be aware of the possibility that gestures may be subconscious communications. By raising his awareness of unspoken communications, the vice-president leading the meeting would have seen the responses to his presentation in a totally different light.

When we listen to someone suspiciously and mistrust what we are being told, the muscles at the corners of our mouth tighten up and pull down. If we have a habitual pattern of listening in this fashion, we will develop a mouth with downturned corners. To the untrained observer,

this may look like the person is always unhappy or angry.

Back at the meeting, Art's downturned mouth does not indicate anger but rather his natural mistrust. Art views overblown statements with suspicion. During the presentation, the corners of Art's perennially downturned mouth will turn down even more when he begins to mistrust what is being said.

When selling an idea to a listener with a downturned mouth, it is important to be willing to admit there may be some problems. The listener will perceive this as refreshing honesty and view the speaker as a person worthy of greater trust. Any flamboyant or exaggerated claims will be suspect. Also, it is a waste of time to try to gain this person's trust or approval through flattery or praise because that would raise another red flag in the person's mind and thus, have the opposite effect. To gain the trust of someone like Art, a good approach is to say something like, "This product is not perfect. It does have some flaws that I am willing to discuss. However, it is the best product of its kind on the market at this time."

HOW TO READ BETWEEN THE FACIAL LINES

The lines on the face are no ac-

cident. Some researchers contend that facial lines are the result of ultraviolet light. However, if light were the only factor, why do we

How can you determine anything from the size of someone's chin?

Medical research has shown that chin size has a direct correlation with developmental levels of testosterone, which is a hormone that dictates aggressive impulses. There is even a medical condition characterized by exaggerated chin size caused by overproduction of this hormone.

But it is not just the subject's chin that matters, but also the feedback the subject receives in response to his or her chin. We all respond to faces. In our collective human perception, we respond to the person with the big chin as more assertive or aggressive. In fact, it would be hard to imagine an action hero with a small chin.

On numerous occasions when addressing a group, I will present two pictures, one of a person with a large, square, protruding chin, the other of a person with a smaller, more receding chin. Then I will ask, "Which one of these people is the star linebacker on a football team and which is a computer software expert?" Laughter erupts as everyone realizes they are reading faces. The person with the large protruding chin will be perceived by most subjects as the more assertive, commanding, or aggressive of the two. Over time, the constant external feedback can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

have different lines on one side of our face than the other? Certainly it is not because one side got more light. Also, why do the lines come only in specific patterns rather than randomly run all over the face?

Habitual patterns of thought and feeling play a role in carving lines on a face. Every line on the face counts, and communicates a habitual thought, feeling, or natural predisposition. For example, if you habitually force yourself to over-focus your attention, you will get a couple of vertical parallel lines between your eyebrows. A single vertical line in the middle of the space between the eyebrows reflects an intensified focus. Such a line appears on the face of those whose self-will and determination in pursuit of their goals gives them a freight train-like quality. Once they make up their minds and get

moving, they are hard to stop.

The curved line on Linda's chin (like an upside down smile) shows she needs to have proof of worth from external sources. She may have received previous feedback about the importance of not being a showoff or trying to be the center of attention. As a result, Linda may feel it is important to be humble and not brag. However, she needs affirmation of

worth to maintain her own sense of self-esteem.

Linda's need for affirmation may result in her doing more than is required or expected of her to receive the needed feedback. In a positive environment, she may be an unstoppable go-getter. In a negative environment where she is never acknowledged, it is hard for her to work at all.

She could easily be brought on board at the meeting with a simple compliment, such as "Before we begin, I want to say what a great job Linda did for us in organizing this retreat. Thank you, Linda." For some people like Linda, words of acknowledgement can be almost as important as a paycheck.

OF CHINS AND DANGER SIGNALS

When was the last time you heard someone say, "Keep your chin up," or "He took it on the chin"? These

expressions show that chins are a universal symbol of commanding, competitive, or assertive natures. The person with the biggest chin will usually get in the last word.

Chin holding often occurs when a person is feeling inferior or overwhelmed in a situation. In such circumstances, we hold our chins because, on a subconscious level, it makes us feel better. We can feel like we have a bigger chin. However, it is important to remember that in reading gestures, there can be more than one reason for any behavior. The real question is whether the response constitutes a communication.

As Henry sits at the meeting, resting his chin on his thumb while extending his index finger to his temple, he is not feeling inferior. Rather, he is trying to get some energy back into his brain. This unconscious response signals that the person has reached information overload. A good connector for him would be "If any of you need a break, this might be a good time to take it."

Face reading can also warn a careful observer about potentially

dangerous reactions and situation. Pupils that are half-covered by the upper eyelids signal a person who does not have a normal view of the world. They often see themselves as outside of society and its norms and could be dangerous. It is no coincidence that in the movies, Frankenstein's and other cold-blooded killers are often portrayed with pupils half covered. Filmmakers are aware of the emotional response that half-covered pupils create.

Another danger sign is the white showing above the iris (or colored part of the eye), which is the sign of a potentially violent person. Similarly, flaring nostrils warn that the person is preparing for immediate action. Some police forces are trained to spot this signal.

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

We are all natural face readers. As humans, face reading is of such fundamental importance that we could not have survived as a species without it. In some ways, face reading is truly our first language, one that can be a valuable tool in understanding the unspoken messages we all give and receive. Of

course, we are practicing a form of face reading when we can pick a familiar face out of the crowd. But face reading goes far beyond mere identification.

Yet our natural capacity to read faces is not a logical or left-brain activity. For most of us, face and gesture reading only register as a feeling or gut reaction. The level of awareness might be, "There is just something about this person that I don't trust." Then we may quickly dismiss the feeling because we lack concrete proof, only to discover later that our gut reaction had, indeed been correct. By developing the ability to understand nonverbal cues and signals, we can experience a true communication breakthrough. Face reading provides our left brain with the data needed to evaluate our right brain's intuitive responses. A new world of awareness opens up when we have a way to test and validate our internal reactions. Instead of ignoring unspoken information, we can decipher its meaning and develop better connection with our audience to accomplish both personal and organizational goals.

How can learning to read faces help me?

There is no short answer to this question. Face reading can be a useful tool for understanding what is not being said at a meeting. But it is also helpful in all types of relationships, including personal ones. Face reading can bring a deeper insight in interviews, counseling, hiring, and negotiating. But maybe one of the most important uses of face reading is in conflict resolution.

Conflict is almost impossible to avoid. It surrounds us in our society, our jobs, even while driving down the highway. But what is the real source of anger? What does a person mean when he or she says, "I hate him"? What is really being said is, "He is not like me. If he were just like me he would be great, but he is not, so I don't like him."

Face reading gives us an opportunity to stop and take a second look. From a face reading perspective, we can see there are things about a person that are like us. We do have something in common. In fact, a closer look may reveal that what we find objectionable about the other person may be one of our own qualities that we readily see in others but ignore in ourselves.

Find reading helps bring about a deeper understanding of every person you meet. And, if you truly understand a person, it is almost impossible to hate him.