

Manners And Body Language Across Cultures

What is 'body language'?

Body language refers to the kinds of cultural differences in the ways in which people use their body. But sometimes it's very easy to misread cues. For example, there was a woman I know who was giving examples of active listening as a mode of being a good teacher. And active listening means listening all the way. So she had her students, who were all teachers, role play. One would be talking and the other would be listening. The one who was listening was sitting down, the one who was talking was standing up. The listener in one case, was like this. Now most of us have had a little bit of pop psychology, and most of us believe that when we have our hands crossed in front of us, it means we are resistant to that idea, we are rejecting that idea. And, in fact, when the woman who was seated was confronted about how resistant she was, she says "no, I'm not resistant, that's not true at all, but in Vietnam, when we cross our hands, it means that we're not being, you know, fiddling and fidgeting and that we are giving you our entire attention." So it was really important in that class, to show that there are different signals, that there are no universal body languages.

How do greetings differ among cultures?

I talked to a man and he had gone to New Zealand, and he was in the airport, and he was so shocked because he saw a man waiting for a passenger to deplane. The passenger came out and he was all dressed in a suit, he carried a brief case. And yet when they greeted, they pressed their heads together and their noses together, and he did not know that that is the Mauri form of greeting. That is how they greet one another, but there is a deeper meaning. They are actually inhaling their essence. And it is very much related to what we used to call the Eskimo kiss. But they are really inhaling. In Hawaii, the word that we take as a negative called *howly*, meaning Americans, and it is kind of negative, but it really means not of the same breath. Because they used to greet that way too. They would inhale one another. I have had Filipino students say that they have gone to see their grandmother, or their grandmother for the first time, back in the Philippines. You know what she sniffed me. And it is the same thing. You learn a lot when you inhale the other person. You learn not so much about hygiene, you learn that too, but you learn also about eating habits. Other places they bow. Especially Japanese. This weekend I was at the Japanese-American Museum and I ran into some friends, who actually are Korean. The parents of a friend. And when they saw me, they did the bowing. Other people kiss. Kiss on one cheek, kiss on two cheeks. Sometimes kiss on three cheeks. And you have to say, are they a two cheek or a three cheek person?

How do I know how to greet someone of another culture?

I've had to learn, and I always sort of hesitate and wait and see if a person's leaning forward. You have to understand too that customs change. When I was a youngster women did not shake hands and a man would only shake hands with a woman if she extended her hand first. Nowadays women shake hands with women. And then there's the social (kiss, kiss), which became very popular when Jackie Kennedy was first lady because she was very continental, so she knew about the protocols in Europe. So it's sort of tricky, sometimes ask and if not then just take your chances, but it's better to be, to have less body contact than more.