

Lie detector

Facial expressions can reveal if you are being told the truth

Question:

Is it possible to tell if someone is lying or telling the truth during a negotiation?

Response:

Studies show that most people are not very good at detecting deception. The integrated complexity of information – words, intonation, gestures, eyes, mouth – can be confusing to decipher. The difficulty is that the clues fly by at lightening speed making them challenging to identify and interpret.

Paul Ekman, a noted psychologist and renowned expert in non-verbal communication created a mini-industry devoted to teaching people to “read” body language and, in particular, facial expressions. In his book *“Emotions Revealed,”* Ekman shows that our emotions are deeply embedded and predictably, reveal themselves through facial expressions.

All of us – hundreds of times each day – read faces. When someone says, “I adore you,” you look into that person’s eyes to judge his or her sincerity. When we meet someone new, subtle signals are registered often at an unconscious level. While the conversation may have seemed cordial, even pleasant, we’ve all had the experience of walking away with the feeling that the other person doesn’t like us or isn’t interested in pursuing the relationship.

Ekman argues that hunches are the by-product of what you see, rather than what you hear. When you pay careful attention to the other person’s facial expressions, you see microexpressions that reflect their real emotions. A microexpression is the fleeting, 1/25th of a second involuntary flash of con-

cealed expression that leaks out in the course of verbal communication. To use his words, “the face has a mind of its own.” Even though we can try to suppress our involuntary responses, or facial muscles are often uncooperative. The fact is that we are hard wired to reveal our true feelings.

To test your ability to read facial expressions, go to www.cio.com/archive/120104/faces.html. This is an interesting tool, created by Ekman to demonstrate how fleeting a microexpression is. Test your ability to read the real emotion. Details like lip movement (elongate, de-elongate, narrow, widen, flatten, protrude, tighten and stretch), changes in skin texture between the eyes and the cheeks (bulges, bags, pouches and lines), or distinctions of the eyebrow can be traced to specific emotions. When you understand how to look for discrepancies between what is said and what is signaled, you are better equipped to uncover the truth.

There are, however, a number of factors that inhibit our ability to detect deception:

1. We believe what we are told. As a general rule, North Americans are a trusting lot. Compared with other cultures, we are generally less skeptical and more likely to accept a communication at face value.
2. We overestimate our ability to detect lies. Most of us think that we are good at reading others. However, our desire to want to believe in the goodness of humanity often overshadows our innate discernment.
3. We misread the signals. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we aren’t trained to read microexpressions. It’s not unusual for someone to assume deception when the other party is looking away. The truth may be that the person is kinesthetic and processes situations through their emotions. To access the

feeling part of their brain, they have to look down and they are, in fact, giving the conversation their undivided attention.

Ekman’s research proved that people who are lying express their feelings differently than do those who are telling the truth. The next time you engage with an angry negotiator, watch their lips. If they narrow, that’s a tale tell sign that they are really angry. If their lips remain the same, the person is a pretender.

Deceivers are also inclined to portray themselves as particularly trustworthy and relaxed. They may make such claims such as “I would never lie to you,” or “I really want you to be happy with this outcome.” Also watch for responses that seem more rehearsed than real.

The odds are greater of being deceived in a one-time, transactional negotiation than in a negotiation where on-going bargaining is expected. However spotting liars can be difficult without the right training.

To learn how to make quicker assessments regarding microexpressions, Dr. Ekman offers self instructional training tools at: www.paulekman.com. My one recommendation is that you don’t allow Ekman’s insights on facial expression to overrule your innate instinctual response. Don’t trust what you hear or see as much as what you feel. Just because you can’t decipher where the inclination or thought came from doesn’t undermine its validity. Always default to your best judgment – what feels right and what doesn’t – and hold true to yourself.



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