

The Eyes Have It!

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If your mothers ever said, “Look me in the eye, I want to see if you are lying,” they were not alone. People everywhere, since time and eternity, have determined trustworthiness around eye contact. If you look them in the eye, you are trustworthy. If not, you aren’t! Eye contact is critical for any business professional.

While most people recognize the importance of eye contact to selling an idea or responding to an objection, they are not good at it in a group situation. Rather than solidly looking at their listeners, they tend to scan their audience, giving them only fleeting glances. They often give the impression that they prefer the floor, the ceiling or their power point slides to the eyes of their listeners. Because of a lack of eye contact, the audience concludes the speaker is unprepared or nervous.

Having sustained eye contact is an advanced communication skill. It requires diligence, practice and feedback. Strong eye contact means that you look at individual members of your audience for three to five seconds or a full sentence or thought without breaking your gaze. While eye contact varies culturally, especially with the Asian culture, at least three seconds of eye contact is acceptable anywhere. It is the minimum of what is expected in North America, South America or Northern Europe.

Regardless of the size of the audience, people should feel you are looking at them and them alone. There should be no “eye orphans.” You should finish your thought or sentence with an individual without disconnecting. By looking at each person, you demonstrate your concern and interest in them as people. You show them that you want them to understand and what you say is important.

To assess your ability on this all important skill, it is important to get video taped. Anyone wanting to get better at anything, whether it is a sport, a musi-

cal performance or a presentation, needs to “see” what they are currently doing. Then, they have to make adjustments accordingly.

One of the easiest ways to get better is to practice eye contact on a daily and even hourly basis around the dinner table or in a meeting situation. Talk to each person separately by finishing a full sentence or thought. Do not shift to another person until you have finished your point. Your eye contact should be random, not predictable.

For an important presentation, practice with post-it notes pasted on your bathroom mirror. Talk to each post-it note as if it was a person, again finishing your thought or sentence.

In a large group presentation, picture a clock, and talk to the people at 3, 6 and 9 o’clock. Then the next time, talk to the people at 7, 11, 2 and 5 o’clock. As you talk to individuals around your clock, your eye contact will have a “ripple effect.” People on each side of the person you are actually looking at and many rows behind will feel you are looking just at them.

Getting good at eye contact is not only beneficial for the listeners but it is also terrific for the speaker. It helps the speaker to relax and feel less nervous. By looking at people one at a time, the speaker hosts a series of one-on-ones which is far easier than speaking to the whole group in a one time. It also allows the speaker to read the body language of their audience and to focus on what to say next to particular individuals.

Eye contact is not a “nice to have” skill. It is the most important skill a speaker can have. The more comfortable you become with looking at your listeners, the more people will trust and believe you and the more likely they will accept your ideas.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.