
Eye to Eye

By Lothar Katz

After a long morning of industry association meetings, I was having lunch with a group of international colleagues at a restaurant in Antwerp, Belgium. Waiting for our meals to arrive, we were engaged in casual conversation when a man in a pin-striped suit suddenly rose from an adjacent table and walked over to where I was sitting.

“Excuse me!” he addressed me with an undeniably British accent. “Do you believe we know each other?”

I told him that I did not think so.

In a sharp voice, he said “In that case, would you please stop staring at me!” and marched back to his table.

The gentleman’s complaint thoroughly puzzled me. After all, in order to stop doing something, you have to be doing it first. Beyond my usual glances at my surroundings, I was unaware of having looked at him or, for that matter, anyone else in the room. Others at my table who had witnessed the incident, among them Belgians, Dutch, Frenchmen, and Germans, assured me that in their opinion, I had done nothing wrong.

It’s been said many times: “You cannot NOT communicate.” Never is this observation truer than when it comes to eye contact. When we look someone in the eye, that person receives some kind of message, whether we intend to send one or not. A short glance could signal curiosity or disinterest, attraction or rejection, respect or lack thereof, and so on. A longer, more intense look at another person may be interpreted as anything from love and affection to an outright personal attack.

Aware of these implications, we usually try to adjust our eye contact to the situation, following a set of unwritten rules such as “keeping eye contact conveys sincerity and builds trust” or “if you don’t want to start a conversation, look away quickly if your eyes meet.” These rules depend on situational context. For instance, looking away is ok with strangers but may give those who know us better a feeling that we have something to hide.

Complex? You bet it is. Unfortunately, as with many other aspects of communication, this gets even more complicated when working across cultures, as the introductory story illustrates. While I was obviously not aware of it, I may indeed have looked the British gentleman in the eye much longer than he was comfortable with. In my native Germany, where I still lived at the time, strangers might actually keep longer eye contact than in many other cultures. A German expression for a person looking at another one for an extended time without attempting to make contact loosely translates to “looking straight through someone.” Doing so is possibly considered very rude elsewhere. The U.K. rule set, for example, is stricter and ‘stepping over the line’ is more readily interpreted as offensive, as happened in the situation described. The fact that this scene took place on ‘neutral ground,’ in Belgium, made no difference whatsoever.

This gets even more convoluted between members of certain cultures whose rule sets differ greatly. For instance, the Chinese frequently complain about U.S.-Americans being overly aggressive, claiming that the latter tend to 'stare' at their counterparts. The flip side of this argument is that the Chinese custom of looking away as a sign of respect is often interpreted as evasiveness and 'sneakiness' by visitors from the States.

When to Make Eye Contact and When to Look Away

As a general rule, expect most people in the U.S., Canada, Europe, the Arab world, and Australia to keep frequent eye contact. At least in business settings, you will want to do the same as doing so conveys sincerity and trustworthiness. Exceptions are countries such as the U.K., Ireland, and a few others where eye contact tends to be less frequent.

In contrast, most Asians interpret intense eye contact as aggressive and intrusive, so look away more often than you might be inclined to. This is especially important when dealing with a higher-ranking or more powerful counterpart who might interpret intense looks as open challenges.

When dealing with Latin Americans or most Africans, know that they commonly share the view that eye contact conveys sincerity and builds trust. However, consider also that most cultures in these regions are very hierarchical. While executives and others in positions of power may keep intense eye contact, subordinates are expected to look away more often as a sign of respect for their counterpart.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
