4 secrets to reading body language like an expert
In five minutes you can often evaluate people with 70% accuracy.

How important is body language? - About 55% of what you convey when you speak comes from body language. In fact, when you're speaking about something emotional only about 7% of what the other person hears has to do with the words you use.

More often than not you can tell what a politician thinks about an issue just by watching their hands. Psychopaths can tell who would be a good victim just by watching them walk.

In five minutes you can often evaluate people with approximately 70% accuracy . . . but obviously we're wrong often, and that 30% can be very costly.
What can the research teach us about better reading people's body language?

What you're doing wrong
In *The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help–or Hurt–How You Lead* the author points out a number of common errors people make.
Here's how I interpreted the findings:

Ignoring context: Crossed arms don't mean as much if the room is cold or the chair, they're sitting in doesn't have armrests. Everything has to pass the common-sense test given the environment.

Not looking for clusters: One of the biggest errors people make is looking for one single tell. That's great in movies about poker players but in real life it's a consistent grouping of actions (sweating, touching the face, and stuttering *together*) that is really going to tell you something.

Not getting a baseline: If someone is always jumpy, jumpiness doesn't tell you anything. If someone is always jumpy and they suddenly stop moving — HELLO.

Not being conscious of biases: If you already like or dislike the person it's going to affect your judgment. And if people compliment you, are similar to you, are attractive… these can all sway you, unconsciously. I know, you don't fall for those tricks. Well, the biggest bias of all is thinking you're unbiased.

What to focus on
What signals can and should you trust when trying to get a "read" on someone? They need to be unconscious behaviors that are not easily controlled and convey a clear message.
In *Honest Signals: How They Shape Our World*, the authors point out three to keep your eye on:

Speech mimicry and behavioral mimicry: Are they using the same words you use? Speaking at a similar speed and tone? Are they sitting the way you sit? Is a subtle, unconscious game of follow-the-leader going on? This is a sign the other person feels emotionally in sync with you. It *can* be faked but that's rare and difficult to pull off consistently across a conversation.

Activity level: As a general rule, activity levels indicate interest and excitement. (Often when a woman is bouncing her foot during a date it means she's interested in the man she's with.**)**

Consistency of emphasis and timing: This is a sign of focus and control. Someone who is less consistent is less sure of themselves and more open to influence.

Specifics to look for
Contextually vetted, baseline adjusted clusters are your best bet… but research has shown some specifics are often decent indicators.

Crossed legs can have a devastating effect on a negotiation. Henry H. Calero reported that the number of times settlements were reached increased greatly when both negotiators had uncrossed their legs. In fact, they found that out of two thousand videotaped transactions, not one resulted in a settlement when even one of the negotiators had his or her legs crossed.

There's a consistent cluster that has been seen among people who are trying to cheat you.
Again, and again, it was a cluster of four cues: hand touching, face touching, crossing arms, and leaning away. None of these cues foretold deceit by itself, but together they transformed into a highly accurate signal. And the more often the participants used this particular cluster of gestures, the less trustworthy they were in the subsequent financial exchange.

Who should you trust? Look for people who are consistently emotionally expressive in their body language: These results suggest that cooperators may be more emotionally expressive than non-cooperators. We speculate that emotional expressivity can be a more reliable signal of cooperativeness than the display of positive emotion alone.

And look at people's hands. Palm down gestures indicate power. Palm up shows submission. Gestures of the Open Hand Prone or "palm down" family are used in contexts where something is being denied, negated, interrupted or stopped, whether explicitly or by implication. Open hand Supine (or "palm up") family gestures, on the other hand, are used in contexts where the speaker is offering, giving or showing something or requesting the reception of something . . .

Keep in mind that men and women differ in body language. For instance, they flirt differently:
Via *Fascinate: Your 7 Triggers to Persuasion and Captivation:*
A female begins fascinating a male by smiling at him, raising her brows to make her eyes appear wider and more childlike, quickly lowering her lids while tucking her chin slightly down, in an effort to bring him closer. After averting her gaze to the side, she will, within moments and almost without exception, put her hands on or near her mouth and giggle, lick her lips, or thrust out her chest while gazing at the object of her intended affection. And it's consistent, regardless of language, socioeconomic status, or religious upbringing.

For men, the fascination ritual is less submissive but no less standardized. He'll puff out his chest, jut his chin, arch his back, gesture with his hands and arms, and swagger in dominant motions to draw attention to his power…

How to get better at reading body language
First, **pay attention.** Sounds obvious but you're probably not doing it consistently throughout the conversation.

Dynamics change, especially when you're dealing with someone who is actively trying to deceive you. Unless they're *very* good, inconsistencies will arise ("leakage") and you can get insight into how they really feel.
You'll improve dramatically by addressing the four weaknesses pointed out in The Silent Language of Leaders:
1. **Consider context**: *Should someone in this situation be acting like this?*
2. **Look for clusters of actions, not isolated ones**: *All three of those behaviors are associated with…?*
3. **Get a baseline**: *How do they normally act?*
4. **Be aware of your biases**: *Are you tempted to cut them slack and they haven't started speaking yet?*

Your abilities will make a quantum leap if you realize that body language is part of a bigger context and a bigger cluster and you start monitoring the other facets of behavioral interaction: voice, appearance, clothing, etc.

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