

The Eyes Have It! Is it Eye Contact or Connection?

Have you ever had a conversation with someone whose eyes dart away from your eyes as they're talking to you? You wonder if they're looking at the stain on your shirt or your hair that's out of place. You begin to focus on where they're looking verses what they're saying.

When was the last time you consciously paid attention to the movement of your eyes when you were speaking to one individual, facilitating a small meeting or presenting in front of an audience? Do you make eye contact or do you connect?

Relationships are created from trust, and trust is communicated through the eyes. Would you trust someone who cannot maintain eye connection? Instead we begin to lose interest in this person and we question their credibility and knowledge. We wonder what they're looking at or we walk away because we feel the message is not important to us.

When your eyes dart from side to side, when you glance at the floor or ceiling to gather your thoughts, you're jeopardizing a listener's trust in you and your message. You'd be surprised by the number of individuals I work with who believe they have good eye contact when in reality they don't lock their eyes with an individual long enough to create a relationship.

Eye contact involves scanning the audience, looking above individuals' heads or simply not completing a sentence or thought with one individual at a time. This is the difference between contact and connection; to gain and maintain trust, practice connecting with one individual for a complete sentence or thought. Take a moment to pause as you transition your eyes from one individual to another.

When you forget what to say, where do you tend to look? Yes, at the ceiling, floor, or anywhere away from your listeners. When you disconnect with your listener, what words do you say: "uh" "um" "well," etc., which are referred to as non-words. At this very moment, you instantly communicate to your listeners that you don't know what to say. You begin to lose trust and credibility.

Changing your habit from eye contact to eye connection takes practice and concentration. Without it you increase the risk of not creating or maintaining a relationship with your listener. If they don't trust you as a partner, leader, or motivator, they'll never be influenced to take action based on your message.

Missing everyday opportunities to gain trust from your listeners is not worth another second to waste. Begin practicing today the following techniques to create a new and powerful skill for engaging and connecting with your listener.

- You'll need feedback to help you develop this skill. Practice connecting with the eyes of a family member, a friend, or a co-worker to convey one complete sentence or thought at a time. Practice during meetings, dinner, or group conversations.

- Practice talking only when you see a person's eyes and pausing when you look away. When you're in a meeting, make sure you pause when you refer to your notes and give your ideas only to the eyes of your listener(s). Avoid the temptation to speak to your listener's shoulders or the top of their head, your PowerPoint slides, or laptop.

Be aware of making eye connection when you're in the following situations:

- Visiting with family or friends
- In meetings
- In one-to-one conversations
- Ask the person you're speaking with to immediately give you feedback when your eyes dart or when you look away from them while you're speaking. Practice pausing when you're referring to a menu in a restaurant while the wait staff is taking your order.
- When you're speaking on the telephone, focus your eyes on objects within the room, using the object to complete a sentence or thought. When you practice slowing down the movement of your eyes and staying focused for a complete sentence or thought, the more immediate your new habit will be.
- Take your time and pause when you move your eyes from one person to another.

Speaking to a Large Group

When speaking to a group of 30 or more participants, you may not be able to see the eyes of everyone because of the room setup or lighting. How can you connect with every listener? Select an area to focus on, and the listeners who are sitting within that area will feel as though you're connecting with them. Think about a concert you may have attended where you weren't seated in the front row. Did you ever feel the musicians were playing or singing directly to you?

One-to-One Communication Situations

When speaking in a one-to-one situation, you'll tend to connect with your listeners longer than in a group session. To avoid a discomfoting "stare," give your eyes and your listener's eyes a break by looking away periodically. You may want to refer to your notes, visuals, sales aids, etc. Make sure you **pause** when you look away from your listener.

Eye connection allows you to conduct a one-to-one conversation with your listeners that's professional and purposeful, no matter what distractions may be taking place at the time. When you're focused in your eyes, you'll be focused in your thoughts.

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