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## Become Versed in Reading Faces

Facial expressions expert Paul Ekman, Ph.D., reveals how to read the posturing and poker faces commonly seen when doing business.

By Paul Ekman | March 26, 2009

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In business and in life, it doesn't matter what language you speak, where you live, what you do for a living--the facial expressions you show for anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, contempt and happiness will be the same. You share these expressions with all human beings, and many of them with the great apes.

Each emotion has a family of related expressions. For example, the anger family differs in intensity from annoyance to rage, and also contains such variations as indignation, vengefulness and sulking. These members of the anger family of emotions are reflected in variations in the anger expressions, all revolving around one prototypical expression.

Most facial expressions of emotion are on the face for just a few seconds, long enough to recognize easily if you aren't distracted by your own thoughts, or figuring out what you're going to say next. We don't have to be taught how to recognize the seven universal emotions, but we do need to learn how to recognize the micro expressions.

When people try to conceal how they're feeling, the expression is reduced in time from a few seconds to a fraction of a second--one-twenty-fifth of a second--so brief you can miss it if you blink. Most people don't recognize the emotions shown in these micro expressions. But people can learn to see them. Learning to read facial expressions gives you an edge in business because it allows you to communicate more effectively with business partners.

The Micro Expression Training Tool (METT), developed by The Paul Ekman Group, teaches people in about one hour how to spot micro expressions. A demo of the difference between the expressions anger and disgust can be watched [here](#). A variety of people have begun to use METT, including corporate executives, claims adjusters, sales persons, medical students, TSA, Special Forces and law enforcement.

In one recently published study by Tamara Russell of London University, Russell was able to bring schizophrenics up to a normal level of recognizing emotion after a half-hour of METT training. In another study, my colleague David Matsumoto, Ph.D., and I provided less than 40 minutes of METT training to some sales personnel, while others were instructed about emotion but not given the training. Their supervisors, who didn't know who'd received METT training, rated those trained with METT as more successful in sales, and easier to get along with than the people who were not trained.

Once you recognize micro expressions, you have to decide how to use that concealed information. It depends in part on why you think the other person was concealing her feelings. Was it embarrassment--or some darker motive? In bargaining, we don't expect to be told how the other person is feeling about an offer, but it can be valuable to find that out, just as it is in sales. A law enforcement interrogation is a very different situation, however, in which those intending to break the law, or those suspected of having already committed a crime, claim to be honest but are not.

Consider the intended future of your relationship with the person who's showing the micro expression. Obviously, your consideration differs depending on whether that person is your child, intimate partner, sales prospect, witness or insurance claimant. Your response when you recognize a micro expression might simply be to take note of it in planning what you do next. You might want to say, "Is there something else you're feeling that you haven't told me yet?" Or, "I had a sense you were upset about something that just happened." Or you might be more exact and name the emotion: "Are you worried about something?" In my book, *Emotions Revealed*, I give examples of how to use the information derived from micro expressions in family life, the workplace and friendship.

You might have noticed that I left off my list of universal facial expressions a number of other emotions: embarrassment,

guilt, shame, envy, jealousy and pride. As best we can tell, these emotions don't have a universal expression, even though the emotions themselves are universal.

One warning: You may not always be pleased by what you'll see if you use METT. You may not want to know that your guests didn't really think your joke was funny, your children are hiding how they feel about something, your spouse is not being forthright, or the actor wasn't doing such a good job in that performance. But once learned you can't turn it off. You'll always be aware of the emotions others are trying to conceal from you.

I believe in the long run, in most cases, we're better off knowing how people are feeling, if we're careful not to confront them, and not to use that knowledge for exploitive purposes.

*Paul Ekman, Ph.D., has been studying facial expression, body movement, emotion and deception for more than 40 years. He is professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco. He has authored or edited 15 books, most recently Emotions Revealed, and co-authored with the Dalai Lama Emotional Awareness. Ekman and his associates provide online training on how to recognize concealed emotions in micro expressions. Currently he is the scientific adviser to a dramatic television series on FoxTV's Lie To Me, which is based largely on his research.*