

Expressions

Board Room Magazine September/October 2017

“Chris, I got a call from Benny the other day and he said that his wife had to wait an hour for her half of the BLT she always splits with Sue.” Club president, Robert, continued, “I really don’t like getting these calls, you need to work on the staff training, we can’t have this bad service.”

“Well if the service staff were not guaranteed a tip, and had to work for them, we wouldn’t have any of these problems. I know at Morton’s they receive tips. Tips make the staff work for their money. We need to toss out this standard wage and no tipping policy. Let’s incentivize our staff to work hard.” GM Chris, sat listening as the conversation played out, but winced at this last statement by House chair Jim. “Ha, based on our GM’s expression, I can see that we do not agree!”

Chris was less upset by scooting down the rabbit hole of staff training and tipping than by the fact that a well-intentioned “poker face” failed to deceive the deceived! What Chris was attempting to do during the Board meeting, was simply *neutralize* any expression. That is, not to deceive, exactly, but to show no expression, such as we’ve all heard about good poker players and the poker face, so aptly glorified by Lady Gaga. Chris’s intent was to remain neutral and allow the conversation to continue without bias from the GM, but, the automatic expression gave it all away.

Often times managers are *simulating* an expression, meaning that there is no underlying emotion from which to give expression and the person is pretending to show an emotion that is not supported. This is pretty common amongst GMs who greet every member as if the person was a long-lost friend, when in fact they may not even recall the last time they’d seen the member and are trying desperately to recall the name!

Masking is when we purposefully replace our felt emotional expression with a false expression. GMs and directors face masking on a daily basis, for example, when that well-intentioned member suggests that we need kale on the BLT rather than lettuce because they’ve heard of the healthful benefit of kale – of course, as the GM, we love that idea, and show it in our smile and look of appreciation as we congratulate the member on another great idea that we will “take to the committee for consideration.”

Neutralizing or simulating expressions is very common and well accepted in social circles as is being polite. Masking takes effort and concentration and is certainly a form of intentional deception, use it wisely, members who catch on may end up with an uneasy feeling about their GM.

Chris’ downfall is actually referred to as the *micro-expression*. These are expressions that last a scant 1/25th of a second. This might have been what caught Jim’s eye, that fleeting moment of emotional truth that Chris showed at the thought of changing the staff compensation plan.

Malcomb Gladwell wrote about this sort of thing in *Blink*. Because they happen so fast, it appears that being able to recognize the micro-expression is no better than a chance occurrence. Jim just happened to be looking at Chris during that brief moment and may have detected the micro-expression. And, as far as masking or neutralizing a micro-expression – forget it, these are so fast that research has yet to uncover how a person can influence these expressions. Speculation is that envisioning situations in which one might be “startled” will help diminish being startled. Perhaps wearing sun glasses or a closed hood at each committee meeting might help solve the problem.

Macro-expressions, on the other hand, last 0.5 to four seconds, and are both easily recognized and can be controlled – to a certain extent. However, we, as deceivers, need to be aware that attempting to mask our emotions is taxing on our ability to focus and will reduce our decision making. If we are spending energy and thought in concealing our emotions we lose energy with which to follow the conversation and make decisions. Further, when we are in concentrated discussion *and* masking our expressions, our ability to read the other person is lessened!

Poker players look for the tell in order to take advantage of the other player. Hopefully, in the Board Room or committee meeting, there is no desire to take advantage of one another. Astute leaders will understand that Chris’ silence was an attempt to keep the conversation collaborative and unbiased. Hopefully, the president would ask for the insight that a professional manager will possess. The micro-expression, while difficult to suppress, might be the tell that keeps a good conversation active and a great solution or understanding will be found.

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