



The Eyes Have It

Using Body Language to Understand how People Process Information

Each of us experiences our world in one of three dimensions: we use our eyes to see, our ears to hear and a sense of touch to experience feeling. In the study of communication, these three areas are determined to be visual, auditory or kinesthetic, often referred to as VAK.

VAK can be a valuable tool when presenting ideas or creating buy-in. The VAK process allows you to customize your message in the best way for your client or colleague to comprehend and understand. Since most of the people you speak to won't have a sign posted on their forehead announcing their VAK preference, the challenge is determining which of VAK processes is the right channel.

The greatest comprehension and retention of information happens when all three processes take place: visual, auditory and kinesthetic (in the form of an exercise or actually performing a task.) The most effective messages involve all three dimensions when possible. Since that is not always possible or appropriate, consider the breakdown of VAK preferences.

In general, 70% of the people you communicate with are visual, meaning that their minds form pictures of the words and messages you speak. About 25% are auditory and don't have to take notes to recall information. Only 5% of the people you speak with are truly kinesthetic, which means they must involve themselves physically to process your message. Often these people will fidget or move while you speak.

Since the largest majority is visually oriented, there is abundant research on communicating with eye contact. In the early 1970s, a new science was created entitled Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP for short. Founded by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, NLP studies the art and science of excellence by researching people outstanding in their professions. They discovered that eye movements and expressions revealed a person's preference for understanding and comprehending information. Bandler and Grinder called this *eye accessing clues*.

Listed below are the directional clues people use to process your message or information. As you read the chart, please remember that all of these actions are to the *listener's* right or left, not yours as the speaker. That can be confusing since the speaker is observing a “mirror” image and needs to decipher the clues accordingly. For example, if you as the speaker notice the listener looking up to your left, that is actually the speaker’s right, so you interpret the communication based on the listener’s right (not your left!)

NLP uses the term “constructed” to illustrate when a person is creating or formulating an answer versus remembering an answer. This does not necessarily mean that the person is “making stuff up” or lying. It simply means they are generating their answer instead of recalling it.

Pattern	Eyes Move to the subject's	What's happening inside their mind	Sample of language to create response
V – constructed	Top right	Seeing new or different images	“Think of an elephant covered in pink icing”
V – remembered	Top left	Recalling images from memory or seen before	“Think of your child's face”
Visual	Blank stare ahead	Neutral – seeing either new or old images	“See what's important”
A – constructed	Center (or middle) right	Hearing new or different sounds	“Listen to the rain”
A – remembered	Center (of middle) left	Recalling sounds heard before	“Hear your own phone ringtone”
A – internal dialogue	Bottom left	Talking to one's self	“Ask yourself, what is it that you want?”
Kinesthetic	Bottom right	Feelings, emotions, sense of touch	“Notice the room temperature”

Here are a few examples of applying eye accessing clues:

1. *You are interviewing a prospective client and ask how the decision process works within their organization. Your client shifts their eyes up to the top right and replies...*

Most likely, this person does not have the authority to make the decisions but does not want to appear unimportant. Or, the organization is experiencing a shift in management or leadership and that process is uncertain. Rather than focus on the words only, be aware of the message your client is communicating with their body and thought process. If this company moves ahead with your services, expect a long and intensive decision making period.

2. *You are giving a presentation to upper management and notice that the key decision maker keeps dropping their gaze to their bottom left...*

This person is having an internal conversation with themselves and while your first reaction may be that your presentation is boring, it's more likely that your audience member is distracted with other issues. You have two choices: a) wrap up your presentation quickly and hope that you made your points or b) reschedule the presentation for a more productive time. In either case, brevity is the key in holding your listener's attention.

Of course, it's important to keep this tool within context – most likely your listener will display all of the eye clues listed in the chart. Be aware of repetitive movements or preferences that signal which VAK channel the listener prefers. Then, be sure to use the appropriate language to either create mental pictures, powerful sound bytes or evoke feelings and emotions. When you position your message by using their preferred VAK channel, you dramatically increase the possibilities of getting your message heard, understood and accepted.

Interested in learning more about NLP? Both of the following books outline both concepts and techniques to improve your own success rate:

Neuro-Linguistic Programming for Dummies by Romilla Ready and Kate Burton. You'll find free e-tips at www.dummies.com.

Introducing NLP – Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People by Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour. This is a British bestseller with very intense information.

Allison Blankenship creates confident communicators under pressure. For more information, visit www.AllisonSpeaks.com or call 800-664-7641.