

Career Advice: Eyeball Etiquette

By Richard Lowe

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The other night I was watching the World Wrestling Federation, which is something that I like to do every Thursday night. I know, I know, but I find the show entertaining and relaxing in a strange way ... it's so ridiculous that there is no way to take it seriously.

Anyway, Stone Cold Steve Austin (one of the famous wrestlers with a notoriously bad temper) was chewing someone out. Suddenly Steve stopped in mid-sentence and said "Look at me when I'm talking to you". The person looked at him, then after another minute looked away. Steve repeated his words again, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!". This happened several times.

This little drama got me to thinking, what is it about the eyes? When you are talking to someone where should you be looking? Does where you put your eyes have anything to do with advancement in your career?

It has been said that the "eyes are the mirror to the soul", and in my experience this has proven to be true time and time again. I have gotten into the habit of looking people directly in their eyes when I speak to them and as I am listening to what they have to say.

Why? Because I can tell more about a person from the way he handles his eyeballs than you can imagine.

Someone who can look me in the eye as I speak to them is very sure of himself (note we are not talking about a hostile stare - just someone who can look at me as I speak to them). Combine this with a strong handshake and a favorable demeanor and you have a person who will be very good

for any team. These people tend to be leaders and very capable people. They take direction well because, since they are paying attention to you, they understand what's needed to get the job done.

Don't get me wrong here. We are not talking about a staring contest. What I am saying is someone who can look me in the eye while I speak is almost certainly listening to what I have to say. He is not afraid of me or my position, which is excellent in a team member. I am the kind of manager who does not like nor want "yes men" (or women) - I have found them to be useless parasites which should be ejected at the earliest opportunity.

Thus, when I meet someone, I am most impressed when they have a firm handshake and can look at me directly. This implies strength of character and a strong will. These kinds of people are rare and they are to be treasured and nurtured when they are found.

The worst thing someone can do when they are talking to someone is totally avoid eye contact. I know you've run into this, and if you are anything like me it's very annoying. When I get someone in front of my desk with this habit I start wishing I was Stone Cold Steve Austin and could say, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Avoidance of eye contact implies fear and subservience. Combine that with a weak handshake and a disheveled demeanor and you have someone that you should not trust. In fact, you have a person whom you should not allow anywhere near you.

Some good rules to follow for "eyeball etiquette" are listed below.

Be able to look people in the eye or face as they are speaking, but don't get into a staring contest. Occasionally looking around at other people, say in a meeting, helps maintain a good sense of balance in the conversation.

Keep your face friendly as you speak. If you have a hostile appearance and you are looking people in the eye, then you are implicitly challenging them. Unless you are the leader of a gang, this is probably something that you want to avoid.

Men, it's bad manners to glance at a lady's chest (or other sexual body parts) as you converse. Don't think women notice? They do, and it lowers their opinion of you. Treat any women in your office as you would like to be treated - with respect.

In meetings, keep your attention on the speaker. You are in the meeting to gain and give information or direction. Keeping your eyes on the person who is speaking implies that you are paying attention. It's also a good idea to occasionally look down at your pad of paper (you should always bring pen and paper to meetings) and write a few notes. This screams out, "you just said something important so I am writing it down". It's also an opportunity to avoid the implicit challenge that could arise from a constant, fixed stare.

In meetings, you should also occasionally look around. There are other people in a meeting (usually), and if so you should be sure to look at them once in a while to get their reactions, and to also invite comment and discussion. At the very least, it's a way to shake yourself awake if the speaker is boring or monotonous.

When your boss is speaking, keep focused on him or her. Your boss is telling you something, man, look at him! This person has authority over you and presumably has power over your raises, reviews and progress up the corporate ladder. Listen to him, and show you are listening by looking at him.

There is nothing interesting on the floor. Have you ever noticed that as most people walk they are looking at the ground? What in the heck is so interesting about the floor or pavement that it

commands all of their attention? Sometimes I just have to glance down and see if perhaps some artist came by and painting something wonderful on the floor while I was out! People, there is an entire world out there - look around and see what's there.

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