

Body Language At The Trump And Obama Meeting

By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D

It was a meeting that was obviously highly stressful for both men. We'll never know what was discussed when [President Barack Obama](#) and [President-Elect Donald Trump](#) were alone, but at their joint press conference their words were cordial and respectful.



(Photo source: Twitter)

So was their [body language](#) – up to a point.

As the press conference began, the men were in a “limbic symmetry” pose, (feet on floor, legs apart, hands in lap) so that their body language was identical. Mirroring postures happens naturally when two people feel they have something in common. In this case, though, it might have been mutual fatigue, as both men rounded their shoulders and slumped slightly. Their feet, at least, were on the ground. If they had been seated with legs crossed and upper feet pointed away from each other, it would have been a negative sign.

As they waited for the conference to begin, Trump tapped his

finger tips together – which can be a sign of impatience or a pacifying gesture to release stress. Obama's stress showed as well. When speaking he was hesitant and used a lot of "uh" and "um" vocal fillers. In addition his blink rate was higher than normal. Both men displayed an occasional lip compression – another signal of distress.

The president has always had good body language, aligned tightly to his verbal messages, and this was apparent again during the press conference. He gestured toward Trump when stating that his first priority was to insure a smooth transition, he brought his hand to chest when talking about "my team," and both hands opened with palms up when he stated that he wanted to make sure both Donald and Melania Trump would feel welcome.

Donald Trump's nonverbal cues were congruent with his "post election" body language that we saw as he gave his acceptance speech – softer, less strident, vocal tones, and slower gestures. During the press conference, his body language included broad arm gestures (which non-verbally send power and authority signals) and his signature "air pinch" in which thumb and forefinger come together in a tight circle. (This is a signal he uses most when being definite or precise.) But the one body language signal that caught my attention was a shoulder shrug when he stated that the president had "explained some of the difficulties . . .". When a person shrugs while making a declarative statement, it usually means that the speaker doesn't quite believe or agree with what he is saying.

At the end of the press conference President Obama extended his hand for the handshake, but he rotated his palm up slightly rather than presenting it sideways. Perhaps this was a gracious way of giving Trump the "upper hand" or an unconscious acknowledgement that Trump already had it.

As cordial as the encounter seemed to be, it was obvious that

there was no real warmth between the two men. Not that I expected to see it, but I missed Obama's genuine smile (which is one of his most dynamic and attractive non-verbal signals). Only its shadow appeared, accompanied by a touch on the arm with a personal aside to Trump as the reporters left the room.

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