

# Psycho Geography

By Tim Hallbom

What if you were to discover that there was something incredibly useful for creating connections and achieving greater understanding with people - something you were not aware of before? Would you take the time to learn more about it? There is something. It's called Psycho Geography. No, not that kind of psycho! This isn't a travel article about the places where you can find tailor-made straight-jackets!

Psycho Geography explores the spatial relationship between two or more people across diverse verbal and non-verbal communication events, and takes into consideration one's communication situation and environment. In this article you will learn more about spatial relationships, the effect of non-verbal communication, how your body position affects your vision and attitude (internal and external), and how changing your body position can have an impact on changing not only your attitude but the attitude of the person with whom you are communicating. It's a fascinating field of study and observation. Once you learn more about, practice and explore spatial relationships, you will find yourself looking at people a bit differently. Harnessing and implementing this knowledge is a powerful tool that anyone can use.

In seminars we explored body positioning and its relationship to focus, attitude, resourcefulness, and vision. Often times, we don't stop to think about the non-verbal messages we are sending. Millions of spoken conversations take place every day. Consequently, millions of messages are being sent, unobserved or undetected, along with the spoken word. These messages are conveyed through body language. Over the years I have observed and experienced, in myself and others, the effect of body positioning on interpersonal and group communication. Clients who have participated in these training seminars were often surprised by the impact of how a simple change of position can affect themselves and those communicating with them.

Throughout this article, we are going to explore the subtle relationship which exists between verbal (spoken) and non-verbal (body language/body positioning) communication and the effect on our behavior and those we are in communication with. Read "actively," engage yourself, explore. By participating in the exercises, you will see and feel how the smallest changes can make a big difference. In doing this you will achieve a deeper understanding of the topic.

To gain a greater appreciation of Psycho Geography - and spatial relationships in communication - I'm going to walk you through some exercises. You can try these at home with your family and friends or in the break room with your co-workers. Think of this as a journey of self-exploration. Ready? Let's try the first one!

The first thing I would like you to do is to stand up. Now, look down at your feet. How do they look? How would you describe their position? Your toes might be pointing outward or inward. Are your feet pointing towards 10 & 2 o'clock? Maybe they are a slightly pigeon-

toed. Perhaps they are pointing forward. Your toes might be pointing outward and one foot is slightly behind the other. These are the details you'll want to pay attention to.



### **OPEN POSITION - APPROACHABLE, RESOURCEFUL, "OPEN"**

Now, if your feet were in the open position (see photograph) this conveys openness. Not only physically, but psychologically as well. If someone were to approach you at this very moment, and stand in front of you at arm's-length, they will also feel that you are more open, more approachable. There is a lot of theory behind this, but we aren't going to go into that in this article. These are the kinds of things I want you to explore. As you go through the exercises, open all of your senses - take in not only the physical changes, but the psychological changes as well.



### **CLOSED POSITION - UNAPPROACHABLE, LESS RESOURCEFUL, "CLOSED-OFF"**

Next, if when you stood up you found your feet to be in an open position, try closing them. By that, I mean to adjust your toes inward as if you were pigeon-toed (see photograph). At our training seminars, participants have reported that when they do this they feel closed-off, separated from the group. Furthermore, this sensation of feeling closed-off is accompanied by a feeling of internalization, going deeper within oneself. Your body position, in this case standing pigeon-toed, has a two-fold affect: It closes you off physically and psychologically. Subsequently, without even speaking, you are saying to those around you that you are less approachable.



### **PARALLEL ALIGNMENT - PURPOSEFUL, "FOCUSED," APPROACHABLE**

Place your feet so that they are shoulder-width apart, perfectly parallel - make sure your big toes are pointing straight forward (see photograph), not at a diagonal and not pigeon-toed. Imagine the alignment to be like railroad tracks. Think about how this makes you feel. Throughout the years, seminar attendees commented that this foot position made them feel more focused, purposeful. How do you feel?

Have you heard the expression, "You don't know the life I've lived unless you've walked a mile in my shoes?" Interesting expression. We want do just that. I'm not saying you should walk a mile, but I do want you to imagine, by studying someone you know, the way they walk, carry themselves, place their feet when standing, and think about what it might be like to walk in their shoes. Observe their gait, how their feet strike the ground, how they swing their arms. Now, try to imitate what you see. Make it fun. Have them do the same thing but with you as the picture to imitate. To do this, you are going to have to leave your comfort zone. To experience change, we have to change our experience.

While you are walking like the person you are attempting to mimic, focus on the things you see and feel differently? During one seminar I instructed the participants to take a minute or two to just walk. Just walk around the room a little bit or walk down the hall and back. They were asked to walk like the person next to them. The instructions were:

If you usually walk with your feet open, try walking with them straight or pigeon-toed. If you walk with them straight, I want you to walk around with them open. You get the picture. After walking around for a few minutes, they were instructed to switch between open, straight, and closed foot positions. The feedback varied; one in particular stood out because it was quite dramatic. One participant said, "It hurts my head. . . . It felt like my head was being squeezed -- it was weird. Then I went to my feet pointing straight, it was a big relief!" She felt a significant physical change. Will your experience be as significant? Everyone is different; thus, you may experience something entirely different.

## **A CHAIN OF EVENTS - THE INTERCONNECTED SYSTEM**

The human body is comprised of eleven systems, all highly adaptive to physical, psychological, and environmental situations which work within us at all times. They include the skin, skeletal, muscular, cardiovascular, lymphatic, nervous, endocrine, respiratory, digestive, urinary, and reproductive systems. The human body has been described as one of the most amazingly complex systems known to man.

We can't see all of the systems at work in everyday life, but there are two systems we can see - the musculo-skeletal systems. Consider this example: When you sprain your ankle, how does the rest of your body respond? A minor sprained ankle initiates a chain reaction throughout your skeletal and muscular systems. For example, a right ankle sprain will impact the entire kinetic (movement) system, beginning a chain reaction you can physically observe. The most obvious effect is a limp on your right side. Due to the pain and lack of full range of motion flexibility in the ankle, the muscles in the calf compensate which causes the knee to make an adjustment in flexibility. When the knee joint compensates, hip joint flexibility and range of motion changes also. It doesn't stop there. Once the hips compensate, every vertebra along the spine compensates as well. Back discomfort may not initially be noticeable from the effects of an ankle sprain, but if the injury is left unattended, the impact will affect your range of motion throughout the entire kinetic chain.

At this point, I would like you to explore what happens, systemically, when you change the position of your feet from open, closed, to straight. Walk around for a few moments with your feet in open position. How does this affect your posture? Look beyond the immediately obvious details. How do your knees, hips, and back feel? Go through each of the three positions and consider the changes which occur throughout your lower musculo-skeletal system.

By now you have a pretty good understanding of the physical impact a minor change in foot orientation can have. Let's now take a look at the effect it has on your vision and attitude.

## **ANGLE OF VISION & ATTITUDE SHIFT (AV & AS)**

For this part of the exercise, I want you to not only think about and explore the main shift (adjusting the position of your feet), but think also about how your perspective, perception, and attitude responds to the change. I call this your Angle of Vision. Note any change in your perception, perspective, and attitude. When you move your feet from a narrow position to an open position, notice how your field-of-vision increases. You gain a wider perspective. Your vision becomes more panoramic. Did you notice a difference? If you didn't notice it the first time, try it again. Stand up, place your feet hip-width apart, toes pointed straight forward. Look down at the floor in front of your feet. Now, externally rotate your feet so that your toes are pointed towards 10 and 2 o'clock (left foot at 10 and right foot at 2). How does this affect your perspective and perception? Go through each of the foot positions now and note how each position changes your perception, perspective, and attitude. It's not important whether it feels right or whether you like it or not. Since we have a propensity to do what "feels" familiar, when something changes, we tend to think it "feels" strange, when in fact to someone else it might not feel strange at all. So, notice what happens to your Angle of Vision when you try to walk with your feet pointing differently than what you are accustomed.

## **ATTITUDE - OPENESS, CLOSED-OFF, SEPARATION, FOCUS**

When you place your feet in a more open position, this literally makes you more open and laid back. Appearing more laid back sends a message to those around you that you are easily approachable. Essentially, you become more expansive. Closing your foot position, becoming more pigeon-toed, signifies being closed-off. Group participants report feeling separated from the group physically and psychologically when they practiced this foot position. What impact do you think this would have on a working group?

Consider the following scenario: You are in a group of six people who have been selected and brought together to complete a very important task such as determining where the annual company-wide conference should be held. A solution must be determined by the end of the day. In this case, end of the day doesn't necessarily mean 5 or 6 PM. The group has gotten along extremely well and has produced an outstanding plan. There are couple of details remaining which need to be resolved - concluding the conference with keynote speakers. Since one of the goals is to close the conference on a high note, selecting the most appropriate speakers is very important to putting the final touches on the overall success of the conference. You are among four of the six group members who appear to remain resourceful; however, you notice that the other two have disengaged. Everyone agrees to take a short break and stretch their legs for a few minutes. You want to speak with the two groups members who seem to have disengaged. They happen to be standing together, engaged in conversation. Both appear to be closed-off. One of them has their hands clasped in front of them and his foot position is closed. The other is standing cross-armed, legs crossed, and leaning against the wall. You've learned to recognize body language and notice the messages they are sending. How do you think you should approach them? As you walk toward them, what position should your feet be in? Should you walk with your feet slightly open or straight or somewhere in between? You want to engage them in conversation and bring them back into the group. What non-verbal message do you want to send before you even begin speaking? Recall that when your feet are opened you are sending a message of openness. If your feet are pointed straight, the message conveyed is one of purpose, focus. So, what attitude do you want to convey when approaching the two disengaged group members?

I want you to keep in mind your attitude. If your feet are straight, where is your attitude? If they are a little bit askew, where is your attitude? Has your attitude shifted from being laid-back to being closed-off?

## **ATTENTION SPAN:**

In this section we want to take a closer look at the affect foot positioning has on attention. By now you are familiar with the three foot positions. Let's explore what happens to our attention when we try-out the different positions.

Stand up and allow your body to relax into its natural position. If your feet naturally are in the open position, straighten them now. Pay attention to how you feel with your feet parallel. What adjustments did you make in your attitude; or, put differently, how did this change impact your attitude? You may have noticed a shift in your attention. When you aligned your feet into a parallel position, did you feel more focused, more purposeful?

## **ARE YOU TRYING TO TELL ME SOMETHING?**

There are more things you can notice about foot position. Think about saying something important and lift your left foot off the ground about an inch. What happened? Did you finish saying what you planned on saying? Probably not. Why not, what shifted? I have observed that when a person is about to reveal something about themselves that they don't really want to reveal, they will lift their foot off the ground and then put it back down, as if they were "putting on the breaks."

Let me share with you what I have observed throughout the years while facilitating this exercise. I've noticed that people just stop! That's right. They stop themselves from saying what they were about to say. It's like they are not ready to reveal something personal. I have managed mediations and negotiations, so one of the things I watch, believe it or not, are feet. I have noticed that somebody will be talking and then suddenly they lift their foot. I key-in on something like that because it's an indication that they are not revealing something. In these cases I usually explore further the topic by probing for more information. What's fascinating about all of this is that they are not aware of lifting their foot. Consequently, if you watch what's going on with a person's feet, you will observe this phenomenon, and rather consistently. An interesting side note to keep in mind is that most people lift their right foot. Does this mean that you should head to the nearest Texas Hold 'Em game, sit at the table, bend over, and peer under the table at your opponents' feet? No, probably not the best idea, but maybe during an informal game with your friends and family. If you suspect someone is bluffing, try to get a look at their feet!

## **CALIBRATION - READING BODY LANGUAGE**

Calibration entails reading body language. This goes beyond noticing one's body position. When we practice body calibration, we are looking for changes in skin color, muscle tone, posture, eye movement, etc. World-class poker players develop a keen ability to "read" people. I'm sure you've heard a friend's story about how they knew someone was hiding something because "the guy couldn't even make eye contact with me, and got all nervous-looking." That's because people sometimes say more with their body language than they do with words. "If looks could kill . . ." is a saying with which we are all familiar. Our body language has a huge impact on the messages we are sending. What's being said verbally, and what's being said non-verbally can at times be incongruent, contradictory.

During one group activity I took a few moments to observe the audience. I was calibrating bodies with respect to head position and feet position. Before looking down at their feet, I would guess their foot position based on their head position. I wasn't completely surprised to discover that my assumptions were pretty accurate. What I noticed was that most people, when they put their feet in closed position (pigeon-toed), tended to lean forward and go down, introvert more compared to people who stood with their feet in open or parallel position. Those who stood with their feet in open or parallel position displayed a head position which conveyed attention and engagement.

You may be wondering if one position is better than the other. Instead of thinking in terms of better or worse, think about this in terms of their impact. Each position will have a really different impact on your attitude and communication. For example, if I am standing with my feet open and you are standing with your feet straight we aren't immediately going to have good rapport with each other. I'd be looking at the big picture and you would be more focused. Remember, an open foot position also impacts your attitude. The fact that my feet are in open position impacts my attitude. In this case, I have a more open attitude, looking at the bigger picture. On the other hand, if you are standing with your feet parallel, you are indicating that you are focused, intent, determined. Consequently, we won't be able to really get on the same wavelength. One time I had a group write about their personal values. I looked out at the group and a lot of people had their feet somehow together. Placing your feet close together is akin to introversion, going "internal." When you go internal, you create your own space, and are separated from the group in some way.

Take a moment right now. Look at the people around you. What do you see? What messages are they sending? Practicing calibrating bodies will surely enhance your communication skills. Look beyond the obvious. Hone your skill in detecting the subtle changes in skin color, muscle tone, posture, eye movement, foot position.

## **LET'S GET THIS THING MOVING!**

Have you ever seen Rodan's "The Thinker" sculpture? In my seminars I use The Thinker as an example of someone who is in a particular "state." Rodan's sculpture appears to be deep in thought, deep within himself, completely unaware of what's going on around him. What would you say to The Thinker to get him out of that state-of-mind? I would suggest trying to get him to move. The simple act of moving around can break their state-of-mind. We call this Break State. For example, have you ever had a friend who was feeling down? You may have talked to your friend for hours about their problems. When it seemed like things weren't

improving, did you say something like, "Hey, let's go outside for a walk"? The mere act of getting someone to move can have a significant impact on their state of mind.

Let's look at another example. When I am on the phone at work, I prefer to stand up when I talk to people. It makes a big difference. Moving increases neurological activity throughout the body. The more neurological activity you have, the more effective you are. Have you ever heard someone say, "Okay, let's sit down, relax, and get things done." Probably not. A sedentary body position seems to promote ineffectiveness. On the other hand, getting up and moving around contributes to being far more effective. Actually, the ability to move around is one of the few good things about a cell phone; people are literally walking around and talking. Instead of feeling restricted to the chair, tethered by the telephone cord, a mobile phone gives you the freedom to move. When you can move around, you tend to feel more effective. I urge you to practice NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP) exercises standing up because you will be a lot more effective. Unless somebody is not feeling well or there is some good reason to sit, stand up, activate your nervous system!

## **PROXIMITY - LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION**

When you have two people together working in the same space, same "system," communication dynamics are going to be affected - be it large or small, perceivable or imperceptible.

Let's take an example of an employee consistently coming into work late. Since this behavior is inappropriate and unproductive in most circumstances, something has to be done. Customarily, the employee will be taken aside (privately) and given feedback. There are several ways to address this problem. We are going to examine this situation "head-on," face-to-face. In this culture it is considered "normal" to be face to face, about arm's-length apart.

Here's the situation: A boss needs to meet with the secretary because she constantly arrives to work fifteen to twenty minutes late. The phones are ringing off the hook in the morning and this is a big distraction. The secretary is a good employee, but the fact that she arrives late everyday needs to be addressed. Of course the boss wants to find a useful way to effectively communicate with the secretary.

At this point the boss is standing at the threshold of his office door. Helen, the secretary, is at her desk approximately ten feet from where the boss is standing. No one else is in the office.

Now, let's pick up on their conversation. The boss says, "Helen, I really need you to start coming to work on time." Helen has her head down and appears to be concentrating on her work. She doesn't respond as one might expect. Actually, there is no acknowledgement at all. Perhaps she didn't hear her boss.

Imagine what happens when the boss closes the gap spatially, now only a few feet away and repeats what he said earlier - "Helen, I really need you to start coming to work on time." By closing the gap what shift occurred? Do you think the message became more or less serious? Well, it got Helen's attention this time. The message did not change, but the boss' proximity changed in relation to Helen. Was it a significant enough change? Let's find out.

We all have a "comfort zone." If someone gets too close it feels like they are invading our space. Though, being three feet away, the boss is still at arm's-length. Helen might not feel threatened or distracted at this distance. Though, unlike before, she is now looking at her boss. Her attention has shifted to focusing on the message. She appears to be listening.

Now, let's take this one step further. The boss steps in closer yet, only twelve inches away from Helen's face now. If he had her attention at three feet, what happens when the gap is now narrowed? What happens is we don't feel like we don't have "room" to think - that there is less "thinking space." At this point, Helen may not be able to think beyond, "My boss' face is right in my face. I wish he would get his face out of my face! Why is his face right in my face?" All she is thinking of is that there's someone's face in her face.

In this culture, being at arm's-length is far more comfortable than someone being closer, face-to-face. After all, isn't this why we have the expression, "Get out of my face." How about the expression, "I don't like anyone invading my space."

Let's take another look at Helen and her boss. Now, let's again increase the distance between the two. Now they are about six feet apart (double arm's-length). Let's pick up the conversation again -- "Helen, I really need you to start coming to work on time. I mean it!" The response the boss is going to get will be different based on his physical distance from Helen. He added, "I mean it" verbally, but his distance diminished his intent, didn't it? The increased distance reduces the threat. In this case it makes the communication less foreboding, less threatening.

As you can tell, the response the boss gets from the employee is impacted by proximity. The proximity and the response it elicits may be enough to alter behavior in a favorable or unfavorable way.

This phenomenon is not solely due to cause-and-effect. The boss and employee are in a communicative and spatial "relationship." The proximity between the two changes the dynamics of the communication process, what's being said to the employee and what the employee says in return. Of course, behavior will change with the change in the spatial relationship. Any number of small changes can amount to an overall significant change.

What happens when other small changes are made? Let's say the boss changes his foot position. Instead of his feet being open, they are straight. The boss is back in Helen's face, about six inches or so away. We tried this exercise as a role-play during one of the seminar group activities. I was in the role of the boss and one of the participants volunteered to play the role of Helen. We role-played from different distances. When I decreased the distance to within twelve inches of her face and repeated my lines, the affect of encroaching upon her space was clearly indicated. Her color almost immediately changed. Keep in mind, this was just a role-play.

## **TOUCH**

As we continued the role-play, I started to incorporate different body positions, but always repeating the same lines. We examined the effect each body position had on Helen. For instance, I stood by her side, creating a "V" space between us. Next, I added a touch. Not an awkward touch which could be misinterpreted to mean something else. It was the type of touch you might make when you say to someone "excuse me." What can we explore by adding a touch? This is called tactile, non-verbal communication. There is a big difference between being pushed and being tapped. So, what if the same conversation took place, but this time with an "excuse me" type touch? How do you think Helen would respond? How would you respond? Think about it.

Years ago, one of my students, who owned a restaurant, brought me a restaurant journal magazine. He said the article covered the effects of "touch" in the workplace. The main point in the article contended that if you touched (physically) your employees they would be more honest. I thought to myself, "Sounds like it would get you into trouble." Interested, I read the article. The article described a study which was done in New York City. A group of New York University student-researchers performed an experiment on the impact of touch. Here's what they did. They placed a five-dollar bill inside a telephone booth on the little ledge where you take notes. They would then wait nearby and observe the money being taken. The experiment entailed one of the researchers walking up to whomever took the money and saying, "Excuse me. I left some money here. Did you find it?" As you might expect, just about everyone denied finding money. However, one student-researcher was able to recover the five dollars from just about everyone. Why? What did this researcher do differently? The answer: TOUCH. The student-researcher would approach the person who took the money and say to them, "Excuse me. I left some money here. Did you find it?" but added an excuse me-type touch. Interestingly, it was that small change which made a big difference in the outcome. How did they discover it was the touch that made the difference? Through observation. So explore that type of touch. Keep in mind too that you want to be aware of where you are touching. Also, you don't want your touch to look planned. It should be natural, as though you weren't even aware you were touching them. If a simple touch can have this much of an impact, adding touch to the boss-employee example from above should create a different outcome.

You get the idea? Find a partner and try a role-play like we did. Try it at a face-to-face distance. Note the changes in your attitude and your partner's attitude. Look for subtle changes in the communication dynamics. Try to identify any changes in skin color, muscle tone, vocal variation, etc. Move in closer, angle your body position, utilize touch, change the position of your feet. Anytime you make a change, a shift, ask yourself what changed or shifted in you. Ask yourself if your attitude shifted, if your partner's attitude, perspective, or perception changed.

Make this a journey of discovery. Stand up, move around, activate your neurology, learn, practice! Find out what else could make a difference that we haven't covered.