

BOOK REVIEW

Julius Fast (1991). SUBTEXT: MAKING BODY LANGUAGE WORK IN THE WORKPLACE. Viking Penguin Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd. Reviewed by David Johnston.

Subtext is a book full of practical advice on how to successfully make one's way in the contemporary workplace. It is about how people communicate to each other by way of covert signals in addition to the spoken exchange that takes place between them. The spoken word is text whereas the covert language, often more revealing, is subtext. According to Julius Fast, the author, it either reinforces, or even contradicts, what is said.

Subtext consists of a mixture of a wide range of different elements. It includes body language, the handling of space and time, the use of eye contact, facial expressions, the way we shake hands, the use of touch and the way we dress, the objects we own and so on. Indeed Fast gives many typical examples on how it works that are easy to relate to, including the differences between the way men and women work it.

Most of us subconsciously perceive and understand the nature of subtext. By becoming more consciously aware of it, however, we can even better appreciate underlying messages. Furthermore, we can learn to align our own subtexts to the message we really want to project.

The author makes observations on the nature of subtext and its application in different areas of work and life. In one chapter he explores risk taking, flexibility and empathy

and their attending subtexts. He adds a nice touch by involving readers with easy to take tests that indicate their tendencies in these areas. In addition, there are chapters on a variety of other topics such as how to catch a liar, the subtexts of power, the job interview, office liaisons, and on how subtexts differ in different cultures.

Subtext, in part, is about aspects of the persona, the external mask that we present to the world, but also about the way emotions and feelings are expressed bodily, often without conscious involvement, by way of complex-based reactions from the unconscious psyche. In this book, the author has made a detailed analysis on how it functions in the work place. Although he indicates that subtext can be manipulated, he tends to encourage congruence between it and inner feelings. Nonetheless, as he himself observes, “once we learn the elements of subtext we are faced with the temptation to consciously control the subtext we project in order to manipulate others in business and social relations.” I will add that another temptation is to become overly preoccupied with scanning oneself, people and situations when we would all be better off by being somewhat decently unconscious.

For these reasons, Subtext is the kind of book that may be worth a read, but is then best forgotten. Young people making their way in the world may find it of interest, although there is a risk of their being encouraged to put too much emphasis on the power-driven persona. For those in the second half of life, however, time can be better spent turning more directly within for a more conscious relationship to this subtext and other aspects of the unconscious in the interest of deepened self-knowledge.