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Hand Gestures

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In my article last week, I covered wringing of the hands. This week I want to make some general statements about hand gestures and discuss several of the ones that are of high interest to me. There is no way that I can list even half of the gestures that people use in this short blog article, but I will share my favorites and give some caveats on their use and misuse.

In an article in *Science of People*, they reported that the most viral TED Talks contained roughly two times the level of hand gestures than the least viral talks. Gestures generally improve the accuracy and interest of communication. Usually the use of hand gestures is a positive thing for communication, but we will see that it is not always the case.

First of all, recognize that if you have hands, you are going to use them when you communicate verbally. If you doubt that, just observe yourself as you talk with other people naturally. You will use your hands to embellish your points as naturally as you breathe in and breathe out. If you ever do observe a person who can talk for 10 minutes with no hand gestures, check his pulse, he may be dead and just playing a recording.

On the other extreme, some people use excessive hand movements to emphasize their points. It can get to be distracting and even annoying. I know a public speaker who uses excessive gestures to emphasize every part of every sentence. I found myself listening to him and began to realize that all the movement eventually distracted from his meaning, and I started to lose trust in him.

The habit of hand gestures is nearly impossible to break, so an important concept is to monitor how much gesturing you are using and watch how other people react when you speak. If you see a fatigued, confused, or bored expression, you may be doing too much gesturing.

If you do any speaking in public (including training or teaching), it would be wise to get a tape of yourself from time to time to view your level of gesturing. You may be surprised by what you see on the tape.

Just like all body language, hand gestures are highly culturally specific, so do not assume your gestures will translate accurately to everyone. For example, when Neil

Armstrong first walked on the surface of the moon, he turned to the camera and made an “O” gesture with his first finger touching his thumb and the remaining three fingers straight out. For people in many countries, the implication was clearly a signal meaning “AOK.” However, the people in Japan interpreted it as “Zero” and the people in Brazil and Greece saw an obscene gesture.

The position of your hands as you speak also reveals a lot about your attitude. For example, extended hands with palms up is a signal of openness and honesty. This type of gesture works to enhance the level of trust. The other extreme where the palms are hidden from view while gesturing often has a negative impact on trust.



In any context, pointing is one of the more hostile gestures. It tends to put people on the defensive. If you point a lot while you speak, you would do yourself a favor by toning it down. It takes a lot of effort to break the habit, but you will improve your relations with others if you refrain from pointing, unless you are giving directions or directing attention to something of interest.

We tend to indicate the relative size of things by the distance between our hands or fingers. This gesture is usually done when we are comparing one thing with another. We might have our hands apart by 18 inches when describing a very large boat and then only a few inches apart when we talk about the dinghy.

One gesture that I found particularly useful in the business world was the “Time out” sign where you put the tips of the fingers on one hand to the palm of the other hand. I found that sign to be helpful in a team environment to allow one member of the group to signal he or she is questioning what is going on. You have to make an agreement at the outset between all parties that anyone can make the gesture without fear of being ridiculed. Once you have that agreement, the “time out” sign is useful at enabling more meaningful discussions that enhance the level of trust between people.

When people want to communicate literally, they will often use “air quotes” where each hand bends the first two fingers simultaneously. This gesture is easy to understand, but there is a caveat. It may mean that the speaker wants people to understand the specific wording, but it can also be a kind of mocking gesture where the person does not believe what another person has said and wants to point that out for the record.

You need to decipher the meaning from the context of the message. The use of air quotes can signal disagreement between parties in a discussion. One party may be trying to mimic what another party said with an air of scorn.

The famous “thumbs up” gesture is a quick way to indicate approval, and the reverse (thumbs down) gesture indicates the opposite. These gestures are generally consistent from one culture to another. I have never heard of these signals being reversed in any particular culture.

These are a few of the thousands of hand gestures that people use all the time. The important thing is to use gestures well but not to excess and be very careful when using gestures outside the specific culture where you live. When going to a culture you are not familiar with, it is a good idea to check out the specific gestures for that country. A good book to help with this prepping is “*Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries*” by Morrison, Conaway, and Borden.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/Bodylanguage or on this blog.

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