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Hand and Arm Movements

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Numerous arm movements are part of the body language lexicon. Actually, hand and arm movements turn out to be one of the more cultural-specific areas of body language.

For example, consider people who live in the Northern Mediterranean areas of Italy and Greece. These people are well known for broad hand and arm movements to illustrate what is being said. The stereotypical talking with the hands is easy to spot and is actually true in many cases.

Contrast those broad and active gestures with those of people from Eastern Europe, where hand gestures are normally smaller and more confined to the area in front of the sternum or Scandinavian folks who rarely gesture at all. It is important to consider the home culture when trying to gain insight by the type of hand and arm gestures you see.

It is easy to misinterpret hand and arm gestures, and it can lead to rather serious problems. We see evidence of miscommunication in families, in organizations, and especially in government, where people are frequently working in the international areas. To avoid serious consequences, it is important to be educated on the norms of the culture in which you are currently working.

Hand Gestures

Beyond culture, there are numerous gestures that are very well known and usually similar in different areas of the world. Just for fun, make the hand signals for the following concepts.

- Only a little bit (index finger and thumb slightly apart)
- Great job (thumbs up)
- I completely disapprove (thumbs down)
- I am nervous (pretend to bite finger nails)
- Go faster (two fingers extended and hand revolving around at wrist)
- Stop (hand upright with palm facing the other person)

- This stinks (finger and thumb pinching nose)
- Time out (tips of fingers on one hand to palm of other hand)
- Call me (pinky and thumb extended with pinky at mouth and thumb at ear)
- Text me (finger pecking at empty palm)

We know that by learning to sign, one can convey any concept using hand gestures. I find it fascinating to watch professional signers as they are able to keep up with a presentation in real time. It must be exhausting. I watch the signers in some of my classes when there are deaf students in the class. They are amazing.

Arm Gestures

When you add the arms to hand gestures it becomes much more complex to interpret. Several gestures with the arm are pretty much universal. For example, see if you can make an arm gesture that can contain the following meanings:

- I'm cold (clenching arms across the chest)
- This is going to be huge (arms spread wide apart)
- Just go away (hands in front of chest with fingers down then flicked up)
- Close the door (arm movement showing person closing a door)
- Keep the noise down (Palms down and arms showing a downward movement)
- I will drive you there (pretend to be moving a steering wheel)
- We won! (arms straight up overhead like the touchdown sign of a referee)

There are several broad categories of arm gestures with many sub meanings underneath them. The most frequent gesture with arms is folded arms.

Folded Arms

The most common meaning for someone folding arms is to signal a defensive posture or a closed mind. You need to look closer to detect some of the sub gestures. You might be restraining yourself from bashing someone. If the person is grabbing the upper arms tightly, it usually implies agitation. If the fingers are tucked into the arm pits, it may be a sign that the person is feeling cold.

[Studies](#) have shown that crossing arms leads to lower retention of information and less positive impression of the person who is talking. An interesting way to get someone with crossed arms to open up is to hand the person something, like a book or a card. This action will soften the gesture and often a more cooperative spirit can be achieved.

Flapping Arms

The gesture of mimicking a bird in flight is very rare, but the meaning is pretty clear when it is. The person wants to get out or wants you to get out. The implication is, "Why don't you fly on out of here?"

The Muscle Pose

Holding the arms up at a 90 degree angle with clenched fists is a sign of superiority and power. It is most often shown by men to indicate that “I am stronger than you.”

Be on the lookout for arm and hand gestures as you observe other people, and don't forget to note the signals you are sending with your own hands and arms.

In the business world the arm and hand gestures can tip you off about the mental state of another person, but only if you are alert to the meaning and can properly decode the message by observing clusters of signals.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

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