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Time Out

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The time out signal is a common hand gesture that is rarely misinterpreted, yet there are some subtle differences in meaning to discuss. Let's focus in on the different meanings first and then cover a highly useful application of the gesture in an organization setting.

Please stop talking

If another person is babbling on in a private setting or in a group meeting, you can signal it is time to stop talking and start listening by using the time out signal. This is a helpful use when you are having a hard time getting your points out.

The caveat here is that you would use the gesture sparingly. If you made the motion two or three times, it would most certainly annoy the person who is speaking. It would seem like you are cutting off the person.

Also, this use would be ill-advised if you used it to shut up a superior. If the boss wants to talk, it is usually a good idea to allow it.

I need time to think

When a lot of information is being shared in a steady stream, people sometimes need a break for their brains to catch up with the content. The time out gesture would let the presenter know it is time to at least slow down so all people can understand and absorb the content.

This topic is dangerous

You might warn a fellow worker that to pursue a certain line of reasoning is going to backfire. Rather than interrupt the person verbally, the time out signal will call the question and let the speaker know it would be wise to change the subject. You could accompany the hand signal with facial cues that indicate caution, just be sure to verify the right message was received and was not misinterpreted.

Time for a counterpoint

If one person is landing multiple points in support of a one-sided viewpoint and you want to allow some balance, the time out signal will provide that opportunity without saying any words.

Need a break

If, during a long presentation, you or others need to take a bio break, the time out signal can let the facilitator know it is time to take care of the bodily functions.

Call for a vote

If several arguments have been given on a hotly divided topic and you want to call for a vote, the time out signal can get that message out even while the conversation is continuing.

Need to caucus

During negotiations, it is often necessary to separate teams to discuss strategy. The time out signal is useful for letting the parties know they need to separate for a while.

We are wasting time

Perhaps the most helpful use of the time out sign is in a meeting situation where one person in the room feels the group is spinning wheels going over the same content or dwelling on trivial content when there are more important things to discuss.

This technique is an excellent way to prevent wasting time, but everyone in the group needs to agree **ahead of time** that nobody will be punished for showing the time out sign. The idea is to establish a group norm that allows the signal to be given by any individual with no negative repercussions.

It is then up to the leader of the group to acknowledge that at least one person has an issue. The first order of business is to thank the individual for expressing a concern, and then find out what the specific concern is.

It may be that the individual wants the group to take a break, or maybe the person feels the current content is not proper or redundant. Get an accurate description of why the person gave the time out signal. This is done by asking open-ended questions.

The leader would then check if others have the same feeling, and if so, make the change. If the person giving the hand signal is the only person interested in changing direction, then he or she needs to be treated with respect for the input but recognize there are other opinions among the group members.

The time out hand signal is a wonderful tool if used correctly, as described above. If used with a heavy hand or followed by ridicule then significant damage is being done. It is up to leaders to set the tone for the correct usage so the method will be a way to enhance trust over time.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language" by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador."