

## Body Language 63

### Fist in the Air

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The gesture of putting one's fist in the air is a very common one, but it can cause misunderstandings if you do not couple it with corroborating signals.

Part of the confusion is that the different meanings are at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. For example, the fist-in-the-air gesture at a football game would normally be a way to cheer on your team to victory, while if there were protesters outside the stadium, that same gesture could signify rebellion, hatred, or anger.

In order to ascribe the correct meaning to the fist-in-the-air gesture, you must factor in the context in which it is given and most importantly the facial expressions that accompany it.

When this gesture is seen in public, it is normally part of a group activity where many people are giving the same signal. It is possible to observe the gesture on the part of just one person, but that is rare.

In this brief article, I will describe several applications where the fist in the air might be observed along with the most likely message being sent.

#### **A cheer of support**

A fist in the air can be a supportive gesture among team members similar to a high five. It means we are all together, and we are united in a common cause. We support each other and cheer each other on with the gesture.

For example, you might see a sales team at their convention use this gesture when it is announced that the team met the aggressive sales goal for the year. Everyone would enjoy the year-end bonus as a result of reaching the challenging goal.

#### **Appreciation**

You can witness the fist in the air gesture among adoring fans at a rock concert. You will see many people in the audience highly animated jumping up and down with their fists in the air as they sing along to the lyrics.

## **Defiance**

You can also see the fist in the air at political or social rallies. The connotation here is still that we are united in a purpose, but in this case it is often a negative form of protest.

### **In the Workplace**

Workers can display their anger over a new policy being introduced by having many people in a meeting start showing their fists in the air.

At times like this, the leader who is conducting the meeting needs to see the anger building up and make a preventive statement before the gesture is taken up by most of the workers and it becomes like a mob scene.

For example, the leader might see one person starting to put his fist in the air and say something like:

"I know this is not going to be a popular move, but I wanted to share the information with you candidly as early as possible, because you have a right to be informed of the action. You also have the right to understand the reason this action was unavoidable. I will explain some ways we can get through this difficult time together."

## **Warning**

A fist in the air done by an individual may be a warning to keep physical or emotional distance. The idea here is to tell the other person to back off or face a possible sock in the jaw. The gesture may be accompanied by a shaking of the fist as the wicked witch did in "The Wizard of Oz." As she shook her fist she cackled, "I'll get you my pretty, and your little dog too."

In a work setting, you can avoid this kind of acrimony by having acceptable behaviors identified in advance. If the whole team has agreed to treat each other respectfully, then the threats or warnings will be fewer.

## **Hate**

When the gesture is coupled by a stiff arm, it is more serious and an indication of extreme prejudice against a person, group, or ideal. Another dead give away for this attitude is the facial expression. If the person looks angry, then chances are he is expressing some form of hatred.

The news showed an example of that at a White Supremacists Hate Rally at University of Virginia in 2017. Many of the marchers had their fist in the air as they chanted “Jews will not replace us.”

I once witnessed a large group of union workers with their fists in the air to express frustration and lack of trust with the management group. This public display of extreme disapproval was a major setback for the organization. It took months of effort to rebuild the respect of these workers.

The lesson here is to intervene with corrective measures before the frustration boils up to the point where people are shaking their fists in the air. Once people start using this gesture, it is a long and expensive road back to stability.

There are numerous examples of organizations that have pushed workers too far experience the push back of rebellion. The antidote is to build and maintain a culture of trust so that people feel heard and appreciated all along. That way the resentment never builds up to the boiling point.

### **Resolve or unyielding**

When coupled with a clenched jaw and slight scowl, the fist in the air signifies an unyielding posture to what is going on. I am reminded me of the lyrics to a song, “I Won’t Back Down,” by the late Tom Petty:

I'll stand my ground  
Won't be turned around  
And I'll keep this world from draggin' me down  
Gonna stand my ground  
And I won't back down.

You can see that there is a wide spectrum of possible meanings to a fist in the air gesture. You must be alert to the circumstances and the facial expressions to pick out an accurate meaning.

If you sense frustration building up, take special care to mitigate the damage before people start shaking their fists or you will be in for a long recovery. If you have managed to build trust by reducing the fear in your organization, you are less likely to need to take remedial actions.

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