

Body Language 64

Hand slap

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



The hand slap is a gesture that is normally exchanged between friends. It often takes place in two parts, especially if both parties are standing. First the individuals slap their hands together at shoulder height or above (this is known as a “high five”), then one individual puts the same hand at waist level palm up and the other person slaps it with his palm down.

For this gesture to work as intended, it is imperative that both people have the palm of one hand engaged in the exchange. If a person slaps another person anywhere on the body without palm-to-palm contact, it is almost universally interpreted as a put down: like “a slap in the face.”

It is also possible to have both hands involved in the gesture. Some people prefer that method but the meaning is the same regardless of whether it is one or both hands.

There are numerous examples of when a hand slap might be the appropriate gesture to use. Let’s examine several situations and discuss how the slap works as a congratulatory gesture.

Cheering on a runner

Imagine your spouse is a runner in a marathon. You are standing on the sidelines, and there is so much cheering, your mate would never pick out your voice. But as she passes by you, she gives you a hand slap gesture as a thank you for your support.

An example in the work setting would be a worker completing a difficult assignment ahead of the due date. The manager might give this person a welcoming high five.

After a supervisor makes a great welcoming speech

Suppose a supervisor has just given an amazing onboarding talk to a group of 15 new hires. It is well known that getting new employees off to an excellent start emotionally does wonders for their successful incorporation into the organization. The manager, who was watching the training gives the supervisor a high five as he walks to the back of the room.

A speaker comes off stage

The person waiting in the wings gives the hand slap gesture as a way to indicate the speaker nailed the presentation. No words need be said for the meaning to come through loud and clear.

Manufacturing team does a product change in record time

Suppose a group of employees on a packaging line has taken on the challenge to make product changes more efficient. They try several new ideas and come up with a way to get the job done in half the time it normally takes. The supervisor does a high five with all of the team members as a way to congratulate them.

Slapping yourself

If a person slaps himself, it is normally a gesture of frustration rather than congratulations. Most often a person will slap herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand to indicate that she just made a bone-head move.

The only frustrating part of the hand slap gesture is if one person wants to do the two part variety but the other person only participates in the first half of the gesture. The cure for that kind of awkward situation is to take your cue from the other person. If you see no sign of the second half at waist high, then don't offer it.

On flip side, if the other person sticks out her hand waist high with palm up, it is an indication that she wants to do the full double hand slap. You need to be alert to pick up the desire of the other person in real time.

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