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Talking With Your Hands

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Most of us make hand gestures while we are talking. The vast majority of the time when we talk using our hands for emphasis, we are unaware we are even doing it. The hand movements are just a natural way to assist us in communicating meaning.

This brief article examines the phenomenon of hand gestures while talking and suggests some guidelines that may be helpful for your professional and personal life.

The major variable in hand gestures to emphasize verbal communication is the amount that is done. Some people have almost no hand animation, regardless of the topic, and other people gesture practically for every syllable of every word. That frequency can get tedious for the listener very quickly.

An extensive study was reported in [HuffPost](#) where people studied thousands of Ted Talks and counted the number of hand gestures in the standard 18 minute length. They found that the most popular speakers made an average of 465 gestures in their talks while the least popular speakers averaged less than half that number.

This research indicates that giving 2-3 hand gestures for the average sentence helps listeners stay interested in the subject. But if we have 10-15 gestures in an average sentence, that constitutes an overload situation. People will eventually tend to tune out.

If you want to view the frequency of hand gestures and count for yourself, just listen to a political debate. Since the stakes are high and the participants are vying for the most attention, the gestures are usually more frequent. The gestures get more frequent as the level of tension increases. Also, since debates are usually done before a large audience, that also encourages large hand gestures to animate the points being made.

Hand gestures enhance story-telling, because they make the subject come alive more than just the plain words would do. Suppose you are describing the difference between a huge military vessel and a tiny fishing boat. If you hold your hands out wide apart for the former and just use your thumb and first finger to illustrate the smaller boat, people will grasp the meaning easier. Experienced and professional story tellers use their entire body to emphasize their points rather than just their hands.

Some people are clumsy with hand gestures and do not have a congruent presentation. Suppose you were using words that describe a swan floating gracefully in the water, but your hand gesture was of a chopping motion with a vertical hand. The meaning would be difficult to interpret. Some people are frequently incongruent, and it ultimately leads to a lowering of trust just the same as if the facial expressions are not consistent with the words.

Gestures originate in the Broca's area of the brain located on the left side of the brain and part of the frontal lobe. We also use this area of the brain to decode the gestures of others. If a person has suffered a brain injury, it may be more difficult to give consistent signals or to understand the signals of others. If you see someone who frequently misuses gestures or often takes things the wrong way, that person may have suffered a brain injury from a fall or a crushing hit in football.

Another aspect of gesturing while talking is to be alert for the imaginary box that is bounded on the sides by your shoulders, on top by your chin, and on the bottom by your beltline. If the majority of your gestures are inside the box, then they will not be viewed as "over the top," On the other hand, if you are prone to fling your arms out to the maximum length as you communicate, people will think you are an "out there" kind of personality.

One person who has a habit of flinging her arms to the maximum extent is Elizabeth Warren. If you view her in a debate situation, you will see a good example of extreme gesturing. That habit is neither good nor bad; it is just her way of communicating. If most people used that much emphasis for key points, it would become a much more animated world.

You also need to take into consideration the relative size of the other person when you talk using gestures. If a large imposing person uses wide gestures when addressing a much shorter person or a child, the result can be highly intimidating for the shorter person, and it may result in a lowering of trust.

Since most of the time you are not consciously aware of your gestures, it would be a good idea to pay attention to your pattern in different circumstances. How many gestures do you use when you have an argument with your kids? How many do you use when you are describing a particularly bad storm? How many do you use when trying to communicate information with people at work?

In this regard, professional speakers have an advantage. They frequently have recordings of their talks, so they can gauge the level of gesturing they use and moderate it as appropriate to become more polished.

You can benefit just by paying attention to your hands as you monitor your communication effectiveness more consciously. It will allow you to improve your connectivity with people and raise the level of trust you are able to achieve with them.

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