

FACE to FACE

Some Gestures Have Universal Meaning

People communicate when they make gestures. Their real thoughts and feelings are right there in the open despite their choice of words. Most gestures are specific to individual cultures though. Only people within that group really know what they mean.

For example, placing the index finger and thumb together to form a circle makes the "A-OK" sign. In English-speaking countries, it means everything's okay or all is fine. Displayed in France, though, it stands for zero or nothing. The Japanese understand it means money. But, in Germany, Brazil, Russia and some Mediterranean countries it's an obscene sign. Another one, "Thumb-Up", also has different meanings in different parts of the world. In the United States, it's a hitchhiking signal, everything's okay or a good luck sign. In other places like Iran or Greece, though, people are insulted.

A few gestures do share the same message, no matter what part of the world. Facial expressions such as surprise and fear all look the same globally. Nodding the head forward means yes and shaking it from side to side means no from California to Thailand. Other gestures that have universal meaning are the shoulder-shrug, palm display, and arm barrier.

Shoulder-shrug

Shrugging the shoulders is a worldwide sign of helplessness, resignation, uncertainty, or confusion. There are five components. Lips turn down forming a pout, the palms rotate up, the shoulders and eyebrows



rise. The head may also tilt slightly to one side. Fully formed, it makes the body "shrink" mirroring the typical submissive language that goes with it, such as I'm not sure or it wasn't my fault.

A full display is pretty easy to read. When people try to hide emotion, though, sometimes only one part comes out. A palm may turn up, one shoulder rises, or the pout forms with a head tilt but without an upturned palm. The message is still the same even though it's just a fragment we see. I asked my daughter recently if she had any homework. She "answered" by extending her arm and rotating one hand up. Even though she didn't say, I knew what she meant, i.e. I don't know. Shoulder-shrug fragments are important



ARM-CROSS: Folding the arms may be comfortable but it is usually perceived as negative. Both the arm-cross and hands in pockets conceal the palms. This can cause unnecessary psychological blocks to communication. Notice that the man at right keeps a hand on his hip while crossing the legs. This negative posture shows there is friction within the group not openness. He is being interviewed about an illegal alligator.

clues during an interrogation. They are often the first non-verbal signs of surrender. Especially when they show up by themselves without any words.

Another interesting aspect of the shrug is how high the shoulders go up when responding to questions. According to Paul Ekman who studies lying, shoulders rising only slightly half inch or so

can be a strong indication the person is trying (but not succeeding) to screen how they really feel. Ekman says an increase in these small shrugs during a conversation can also indicate a lie.

The Palm Flash is an element of the shoulder-shrug display. Again, when in context, displaying only the palm sends the same message as a fully formed shrug.

Waving, taking an oath, arrest situations (show me your hands), all generally sup-



A soccer player displays the shoulder-shrug after a called foul. The palms have rotated up and the shoulders have risen. The underlying message (honesty) as in "Honestly I never touched him," remains even though other components, the pout and head tilt, are not present.

by Jeff Baile



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PALM FLASH: An abrupt palm flash during an interrogation (left) can often be an initial sign of giving up. He confessed shortly after this photograph was taken. Trying to convince someone to change their mind can also bring forth the palms (right). Showing the palms is a universal sign of humility, submission, and non-aggression.



port, that an open palm historically means truth or honesty. The opposite meaning is sent, however, when palms face down or are hidden completely. We should notice

then when people have their hands in pockets, behind the back, or covered up by the arm-cross gesture. In context, concealing the palms is an unconscious gesture people

do when attempting to hold back their true feelings and when they lie.

Arm Crossed Over Chest

I often begin my courses by asking audience members to make a negative posture. With few exceptions, they fold both arms over their chests. David Givens says the arm-cross is "a self-comforting, self-stimulating posture, unconsciously used to alleviate anxiety and social stress." Sometimes, it's just comfortable to stand or sit this way. So, it's easy to see how people can get the wrong idea.

Be self-aware while going about your daily patrols. Try to keep arms and hands at your side. Flash the palms as much as you can while you talk. If we want people to open up, limit arm-crosses even though it may be uncomfortable. Folded arms seem to form a communication barrier whether intended or not.

Communication researchers have also found keeping a negative gesture can

affect performance. In one study, students holding the arm-cross in a classroom setting learned 38% less than those who didn't have their arms folded. It appears then that forming this gesture may well influence a person's frame of mind. From an enforcement perspective, we presume maintaining the arm-cross will help a suspect hold back even longer.

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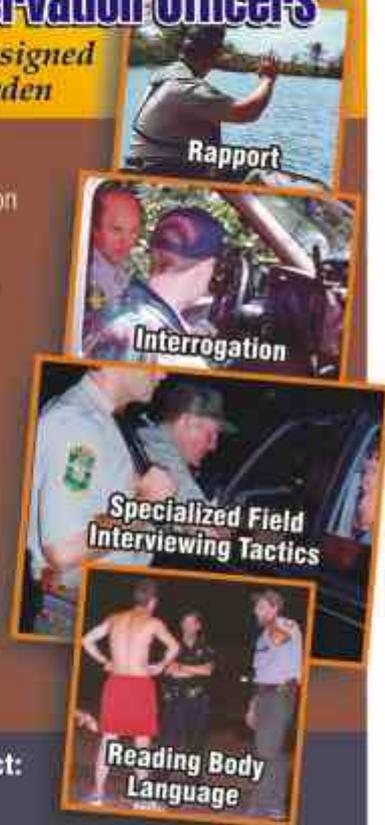


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