

HAND GESTURES TO AVOID IN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS



Body language is one of the more nuanced aspects of intercultural communication. It is also one of the most essential—the way people express respect, disagreement, or concurrence are often conveyed through physical proximity, facial expressions, or eye contact. Hand gestures are one such essential part of non-verbal communication, and they often have different implications in different cultural contexts. Fortunately, many of these gestures are easy to avoid so you don't confuse or offend local colleagues, customers and clients. Consider the following gestures and some alternatives to modify your body language:

POINTING

Many Western cultures, particularly the US and Canada, gesture toward someone or something with their index finger, but this is considered impolite in several European, Latin American and African nations. It is particularly rude in China, Japan, and Indonesia. In some European and Middle Eastern countries, it is customary to point with your middle finger. However, this gesture is very offensive in most Western nations and considered impolite in many other countries, especially when taken out of context.



Best Practice: *When you gesture toward a person or inanimate object, simply use your entire hand.*

THUMBS-UP & “OK”



There are many cultures where a thumbs-up indicates that something is good or well done. In Italy, Greece, Iran, and Iraq, however, this is an insulting gesture. The “Ok” sign is also a common gesture to indicate a positive reaction, but in France, the symbol means “zero” or “worthless.” Furthermore, in Venezuela, Brazil, and Turkey the gesture is actually offensive, especially to LGBT+ people.

Best Practice: *Learn how to say “yes” or “okay” in a local language, or ask a local what hand gesture is appropriate.*

BECKONING

Curling your index finger toward you with your palm face upward is a common gesture to beckon someone to come toward you. But in China, Japan, Singapore, and other parts of East Asia, the gesture has a very negative connotation. In the Philippines, you can even be arrested for using it.



Best Practice: *When you gesture to beckon someone, it is better to face your palm downward and make small sweeping motions toward yourself.*

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FINGERS CROSSED

Crossing one's fingers is a common way of expressing hope for luck or good fortune in many cultures. However, in Vietnam, this is considered a very vulgar gesture.

Best Practice: *Cultivating positivity for one's family and community are very important in Vietnamese culture. To express a wish for this kind of positive energy, bring your palms together at your sternum and bow your head slightly forward.*



"VICTORY" SIGN



In many cultures, it is common to indicate the number two by holding up your index and middle fingers. The sign has also called the “peace sign” or can indicate “V” for “victory.” However, in countries such as the UK, Ireland, Australia, and India, it can be offensive to create a “V” with your fingers if your palm is facing toward you.

Best Practice: *It is better to indicate the number two by holding your thumb and index finger up.*

EXTRA TIPS

- In the Middle East, use both hands during a handshake. Use your right hand to grasp their hand, and your left hand to grasp their forearm near the elbow.
- In the Middle East, North and sub-Saharan African nations, it is considered unclean to hand objects to people with your left hand.
- In East Asian countries, present and receive items with both hands.

