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Strange Handshake

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



At first glance, the handshake in the picture looks fine. It is two men who appear to be meeting for the first time or at least agreeing on something of consequence.

I use this picture of body language in the classroom as just one example to analyze.

As I studied the picture, I found several areas where the whole thing seemed to be staged and phony. Can you spot the issues?

Here are five areas where I believe the signals being sent are at least mixed and at most actually negative.

Body Position

The man on the right is standing with his shoulders at ninety degrees from the shoulders of the man at the left. A good handshake occurs when the shoulders are parallel. It is called “square shoulders.”

With the man on the left turned, it is hard to tell if he is planning to flee or maybe he just got up out of his chair. Regardless, try to aim to be square shoulder to the other person for a good, equal handshake.

Hand in Pocket

Bill Acheson, in his excellent program on “Advanced Body Language,” described that you can get a lot of information by noticing what the non-shaking hand is doing.

What you want to see is the non-shaking hand moving forward and upward in the direction of the other person. Having a hand in your pocket or behind your back is a negative sign that you are feeling cautious or have something to hide.

Phony Smiles

Both parties have pasted-on smiles that do not look genuine. They are forced and come across as duplicitous. A genuine smile starts with the eyes and forms a kind of oval with the facial muscles. It is called a “Duchenne Smile.”

It is a good idea to show your teeth when you smile while shaking hands with another person. This aspect of facial expression goes back centuries to when having good teeth was a signal of good breeding or higher status.

Bolt Upright

The man on the left is rigidly upright and leaning slightly backward. He is leaning away from the other man. It is better to be leaning slightly toward the other person. The man on the right is leaning in, but he is turned so that the gesture loses impact.

The Grip

In this case, the grip seems to be OK from what we can tell in a picture. It is a firm grip with both parties contributing equally. One person is not trying to wrestle the dominant (palm down) configuration.

We cannot ascertain from the picture if the pressure being imposed by each man is the same. For an ideal handshake, it should be medium pressure with both people contributing the same level of intensity.

When one person tries to impress the other with a more firm grip, it becomes a contest rather than an expression of equality. The rule I like to use is, if the other person can feel the handshake after it is over, you have used too much pressure.

Use care, because you have no way of knowing the other person’s physical condition. I know this is true because I have a hand disorder that makes certain movements and heavy pressure quite painful. Lucky for me, the problem is in my left hand, so it does not affect me personally when shaking hands, but it does remind me that I cannot assume the other person’s physical condition.

While the picture looks OK for a handshake, a closer examination reveals many things that are not ideal. Learn how to shake hands well, and you will have a significant advantage in life. Ignore the rules, and you will find yourself wondering why people have trouble trusting you early in your relationship.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 600 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

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