

Body Language 65

Fist Bump

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Did you ever go to shake the hand of another person and get a gesture back that the other person would rather do a “fist bump”?

I am doing a lot of that this week, because I have a bad cold and don't want to spread more germs than I have to.

According to [Wikipedia](#), the "fist bump" or "pound" can be traced to boxers instructed to touch gloves at the start of a contest. The modern gesture may have arisen spontaneously on city basketball courts and was popularized by basketball player Fred Carter in the 1970s.

Barack Obama

Back in the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama launched a media storm when he nonchalantly fist bumped his wife Michelle. "Obama's Fist-bump Rocks The Nation!" [The Huffington Post](#) exclaimed. "Is the fist bump the new high-five?" NPR's Laura Silverman asked.

The fist bump gesture is useful in many circumstances not related to the health of one or both of the people who are meeting. It is intended to be a friendly greeting or celebration move. Let's take a look at the rules of engagement and some precautions for fist bumping.

Relative power

One reason the fist bump is a helpful gesture is that when done correctly there is equal participation and transfer of power between the two people. A hand shake is subject to all kinds of subtle interpretations based on which person has the hand on top, how much pressure is used, how long the hand shake lasts, and a few other considerations. I have written about handshake protocol in another article titled [Strange Handshake](#).

The fist bump is quick, equal, and not easy to manipulate. It is intended to be a tap for both people rather than a major forward thrust.

Position

The fist bump is almost always done with the knuckles on top and the fingers curled under below the palm. Both parties make the same movement at the same time. A sidewise fist bump, with the thumb on top, while sometimes seen, might easily be interpreted as a hostile gesture, so avoid doing that move.

Having the knuckles on the bottom and the curled fingers on top would look much more like a gut punch, so that should be avoided if you are interested in conveying the usual meaning of a fist bump, which is “you and I are buddies.”

Transfer of bacteria

According to [one study](#), the fist bump transfers only about 10% of the amount of bacteria as an average handshake. The reason is that far less surface area of each person comes in contact when doing a fist bump. The fist bump is also much faster in terms of contact time than a handshake. So from a standpoint of better hygiene, the fist bump is significantly better than a handshake.

Awkward moment

The awkward moment with a fist bump is when one person extends his or her hand to shake hands and the mirror image is not an extended hand but a fist. In this case, it is wise to join the fist bump gesture rather than hold out for a full handshake. The person extending the fist has a specific reason for doing that, and you need to honor that reason, whatever it is.

The fist bump will likely never completely replace the handshake, but it is gaining in popularity each year. It is best to get used to the gesture and roll with it rather than fight the trend.

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