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Handshakes Post COVID-19

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I am having to modify my leadership training material as a result of COVID-19. I do a section on the impact of Body Language on trust between people.

Historically, I have discussed the handshake at length because how you do it impacts the first impression people have about you, which has a huge impact on the trust you can achieve with the other person.

We may get back to shaking hands post COVID-19, but it will likely be quite a while before people are comfortable doing it.

Every culture has some form of touch ritual for people when they first meet. I suspect they will all be impacted by the pandemic we have experienced in 2020. In western cultures, and several others, the handshake is the preferred method of greeting a person you are just meeting. What are the options, and how will they impact the ability to bond with the other person?

Fist bumps

The fist bump is assumed to be far less contaminating than a full handshake for two reasons. First the contact area is much less, and second the duration of the contact is far less. Still, if I am going to be uncomfortable with a full hand shake, I am also going to be a bit leery of a fist bump for quite some time.

Elbow bumps

Having the elbows touch is suggested as an alternative, but it is a really poor one because it is difficult to maintain eye contact when doing it, and the intimacy is destroyed by the awkward position required to do it. When watching two people try to do an elbow bump, I usually see it followed by an awkward kind of laugh as if the whole thing is some kind of joke. This could become less of an issue in the future, but I really doubt it.

Thumbs up

Here you can maintain a good distance from the other person. It is a positive and friendly gesture that sends a good signal. There is no touching at all, so the possibility of contamination is greatly reduced. Unfortunately the intimacy of the handshake is lost with a thumbs up.

Wave

A cheerful wave may be as good as a thumbs up gesture. Here you can combine a facial expression of gratitude for being able to meet the other person. That is the most important ingredient that made the handshake so valuable in the past.

We have to modify our habitual touch ritual that we learned as children and have been using all our life up to this point. That's too bad, because the handshake was a powerful way to show your eagerness to meet the other person. In my programs, I stress that it is possible to plant a seed of trust in the first 10 seconds, and a large part of doing that was a proper handshake.

The substitute greeting gestures are never going to replace the value of a handshake as a way to have two people bond when first meeting. That is an unfortunate reality, which means we will need to work extra hard to demonstrate our emotions without touching in the future, at least for a while.

Pay attention to how you greet new acquaintances in the future and select a method that you feel conveys the right spirit and that you can apply consistently. We may return to the handshake someday in the future based on some kind of immunization program, but I believe the scars left by this huge disruption of COVID-19 will have a long memory in the minds of most people.

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