



GESTURES ARE among the first behaviours we learn in life. As newborns, we see our parents and care-givers making faces at us. We watch them shake their heads and wave their arms in certain ways and use their fingers to point at us or draw our attention to our surroundings. Gestures and expressions that we learn to interpret and use early in life become second nature and deeply engrained in our unconscious as a form of communication. As we grow up, countless other gestures and non-verbal nuances are added to this unspoken lexicon, a veritable language that we often forget to “translate” when communicating with people from other cultures.

Living in Brazil as a teenager, I wore a necklace with a *figa* charm on it. The *figa* is a clenched fist with the thumb held between the index and middle finger to symbolise luck and protection. Many years later, I was surprised (and a little horrified) to learn that the Brazilian *figa* is used by many countries around the world as the equivalent of the American middle “f-you” finger (in Turkey, China, South Korea, Indonesia, for example). It’s also the same gesture adults in the United States use when they pretend to take a little kid’s nose. It is definitely not something you want to do to a Turkish or South Korean child.

The American “okay” sign, the circled thumb and index finger, can also cause problems in other cultures. In Brazil the sign is a crude way of saying “screw you”. In France it means “zero” or “worthless.” Besides gestures like the thumbs-up and okay signs, there are also a wide variety of meaningless “filler” gestures that we all use — the equivalent of a verbal “um.” My father taps his belly, my daughter

twitches her nose, and I often rub the side of my face when conversing. I have a colleague who often bites and licks his lower lip. These fillers and other types of habitual movements may seem innocuous, but they could easily be misinterpreted.

For example, imagine you are at a meeting and the person who organised it starts off by standing up with his or her hands placed on the hips. What does this body language

suggest to you? Power and confidence — or maybe, arrogance or aggressiveness? Or perhaps, I am

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happy, full of energy? Sometimes when people put their hands on their hips, it’s simply a place to rest their hands because they don’t know what else to do with them, but how would anyone know this? They can only make inferences based on their cultural upbringing. That’s why it is important to be aware that the intention (or lack of intention) behind your gesture may not have the desired effect.

The first step in minimising the potential for this kind of misinterpretation is to take stock of the gestures you use regularly, and try not to make them in multicultural settings. Think about the hand and facial gestures you use most often. Do

you roll your eyes? Are you a winker? What do you do with your legs when you are sitting? Most of us don’t even know what we do. When I ask people in my workshops to name their top three most frequently used gestures, they are usually stumped, underscoring how unaware we can be of our own bodies.

A good way to identify your gestures and expressions is to ask others what they observe about you, especially people with whom you spend a lot of time, like family members and close friends. You can even have somebody make a video of you. Recognising your own gestures will help you gain control over them, which in turn, will help you communicate more effectively — and avoid a potential “culture crash.” **BW**

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Reading The Signs