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## Conflict and Handshakes

Brenda Kelleher-Flight Ph.D.  
GDP Consulting Inc.  
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# **Conflict and Handshakes**

By Brenda Kelleher-Flight Ph.D.

## **Introduction**

One of the things rarely taught is the importance of a handshake. However, it is widely recognized that a handshake can decide the outcome of a conversation even before it begins.

Therefore, it is essential to understand the elements of a good handshake and the messages conveyed by various types of handshakes. This article provides descriptors of poor handshakes and outlines the components of a good handshake.

## **Negative Messages Associated with Handshakes**

Five types of poor handshakes are described. These include the dead-hand handshake, the fingertip handshake, the dominant handshake, the two-handed handshake and the submissive handshake. This is followed by an outline of other behaviours which send negative messages.

### **The dead-hand handshake**

The dead-hand handshake, also known as the dead-fish handshake, occurs when one person lets her hand go limp when shaking another person's hand.

It looks similar to the pose shown in this picture.

Unfortunately, the messages conveyed by this handshake include;

- you repulse me
- I really do not want anything to do with you, or
- keep your distance.



If you extend your hand in a limp fashion to another, it can subconsciously affect the outcome of a negotiation or conversation. You may not even be aware that the outcome was decided by your handshake.

### **The fingertip handshake**

Today, people are more aware of hand cleanliness and use it as a reason to only use their fingertips when shaking hands. Unfortunately, this does not justify offering only part of one's hand when greeting, confirming an agreement or saying goodbye to another person.

The fingertip handshake is shown in the picture on the right. The messages conveyed include;

- I'm in a hurry, let's get this over with quickly
- I am only shaking hands as a courtesy but I am really not interested in you or your issue, or
- keep your distance.



Any of these impressions remain with the other person long after the handshake and can be detrimental to future interactions.

## **The dominant handshake**

Power imbalances can lead to dis-ease in many situations. One way for you demonstrate that you believe you have power is to use your handshake.

When a person feels she is in control, one way to convey it is to position her hand above the other person's hand as shown in this photograph.



Unfortunately, this handshake can pass on subliminal messages such as the following;

- no matter what you say, my mind is made up
- we are not equal
- I have the power and you do not, or
- I am only paying you a courtesy.

The person who is made to feel submission or less important will carry that message with him long after the exchange ends.

## The two-handed handshake

Many people think of the two-handed handshake as the politician's handshake. It may work in that situation; however, it is not the best handshake.



Folding two hands over another person's hand is not always welcome.

It can leave the other person thinking

- why is she so friendly
- what does she want from me, or
- I don't want her all over me, it is intrusive.

It is always vital to maintain decorum. The two-handed handshake can be left for election time if you are seeking election or re-election within a union or other organization. Normally, there would be no reason to use a two-handed handshake.

## The submissive handshake

When you are new and not familiar with all aspects of a situation, it is normal to feel uncertain or uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is important to avoid showing that discomfort in your handshake.

Note that the person in the picture positioned her hand under the other person's hand. This can easily happen without the person being aware of the message it is conveying. These could include;

- I am not as important as you
- I am uncomfortable right now, let's get this over with as quickly as possible
- I really do not know what to say right now, or
- I feel like an imposter in this situation.



None of these messages will help your situation. This can be avoided if you address your discomfort before entering a meeting or event.

## **Other behaviours which send negative messages**

### ***Continuous shaking***

When protocol requires one to shake hands, it is only necessary to shake two or three times before releasing. Continuous shaking can be associated with nervousness or over-eagerness. It is important to shake the minimum number of times to convey good will, relax, and match other person's level of eagerness.

### ***Leaning in***

Many people become uncomfortable when another person leans over them when shaking their hand. Leaning in conveys a need to be dominant or assert oneself. If that is the intent, leaning in works. If it is not the objective, it is vital to keep one's body erect and at arm's length.

### ***Wiping one's hands***

You may unconsciously wipe your hands in a napkin or in your clothes after you shake another person's hand. This sends a negative message. You may be doing it to ensure your hands are clean before you begin the next task. The other person may not interpret it that way and may feel insulted by your reaction. To avoid stimulating any negativity, refrain from wiping your hands until you are out of sight of that person.

### ***Moving to a dominant handshake***

A handshake may begin as a good handshake and one person may inadvertently take the other person's hand and move it in a submissive position. This sends such a negative message and will stay with the person whose hand was manipulated for a very long time.

There are other ways to demonstrate power and control without using the handshake to send the message. Even though there are many ineffective ways to shake hands, there is a very effective way to shake another person's hand.

### **The Effective Handshake**

There are several points to remember when shaking hands

1. look at the person (avoid looking around the room)
2. smile
3. hold your hand perpendicular to the floor
4. ensure your palm is flat and can touch the other person's palm (a concave hand send a negative message)
5. let your finger fold downward when you grasp the other person's hand
6. hold the other person's hand snugly ( no deadly grips)
7. shake from the shoulder ( not from the wrist), and
8. shake two or three time and release.



### **Final Comment**

How you shake another's hand is important. The power of his handshake cannot be underestimated. The dos and don'ts outlined in this article are designed to support you in achieving your objectives and maintaining constructive relationships.