

MODULE

05

Hand Gestures

Why we do not teach gestures — and what
we train instead

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Gestures make you look natural, animate your words and help people remember what you said. But you cannot install them one at a time. You install the emotion and the gestures arrive on their own.

Gesturing makes you look natural because it is how you learned to communicate as an infant, watching parents use their hands. Not gesturing forces people to concentrate on your face — and if you are not gesturing, you are probably not using much emotion, so your face has little to offer either.

Hands and voice are physically linked. People who use their hands to support their voice measurably increase their vocal inflection. If your hands are at your sides, there is a good chance your face is still too.

Gestures also set your pace, and pace is critical. Without gestures you become more conscious of your words, which creates pressure, which makes you nervous, which makes you speed up. Studies also show gestures help audiences remember what you said.

Here is the part that surprises people: **Steve does not train hand gestures.** Most human beings use only five or six, maybe eight. If you coach someone to place a gesture on a specific line, it comes out mechanical and dead. Instead you train **emotions** — because emotion moves the face and the hands together, automatically and in time.

5-8

gestures most people
actually use

55%

connect through
gestures, including

0

gestures Steve teaches
directly

KEY CONCEPTS

Emotion drives gesture, never the reverse

Told to "put your hands here when you say this audience is great," a person produces something stilted. Feel that the audience is great and the hands go where they belong.

The fig leaf

Hands crossed low in front of the body. It slumps your shoulders and tests badly — audiences report that the speaker seems to think he is insignificant.

Crossed arms

Senate photographers used to tell members to cross their arms to look powerful. It reads as closed. Audiences say the speaker thinks he is better or stronger than they are.

Hands to the belly button

When you are not gesturing, bring your hands to the bottom of the communication and gesture box. Place the thumb of one hand between the thumb and forefinger of the other. It is almost impossible to fidget from that position.

Emotional triggers

The specific memory, image or stake that produces a real emotion in you on demand. Finding yours is what lets you say a line with genuine feeling rather than performed feeling.

FROM THE VIDEO**Michael Dukakis, 1988 presidential debate**

Moderator Bernard Shaw opened with: if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favour an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?

Dukakis showed no emotion whatsoever. His answer began "No, I don't, Bernard, and I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life." He had just been asked about his wife being raped and murdered, and his face did not change.

Steve knows Dukakis, has guest lectured in his class, and says by every account he loved his wife deeply. It did not matter. Steve's team tested an alternative response with real emotion — "Bernard, that's a horrible question. If someone raped and murdered the woman I love, I'd want to kill them. But we live in a society with laws." Audiences accepted it completely.

Dukakis had a large lead early in that campaign. Many people believe this single moment cost him the election.

REMEMBER

- Do not plan gestures. Plan emotions and let the gestures follow.
- No gestures usually means no emotion — and the audience sees both.
- Hands to the belly button when idle. Thumb tucked between thumb and forefinger.
- Pockets, crossed arms and the fig leaf all cost you people.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Find your emotional triggers

You cannot manufacture emotion on cue without something real underneath it. Build your own list now so you have it when you need it.

What makes you genuinely angry? Be specific — not "injustice" but the particular thing.

What makes you genuinely proud?

What breaks your heart?

Which of these connects to something you will actually have to speak about?

EXERCISE 2**The same line, six ways**

Take one sentence you need to deliver. Record yourself saying it six times, once each with happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear and disgust.

Write the line here.

Watch all six back. Which two came most naturally? Which felt fake?

What did your hands do differently across the six versions? You did not plan any of it.

EXERCISE 3**Fix your resting position**

Practise bringing your hands to the belly button with the thumb tuck. Do it twenty times until it is automatic. What was your old default position?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Practised the thumb tuck twenty times
 - ☐ Filmed myself doing it
 - ☐ Caught my old habit on camera
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BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: