

## **Hand Signals & Cultural Differences**

### **HAND SIGNALS**

**SAY:** You can use your hands to give nonverbal communication.

**Q:** How many nonverbal hand signals can you think of?

(Ask each person to make a hand signal. They might wave hello or goodbye, give thumbs up, meaning "OK," or thumbs down, meaning "bad." They could motion someone to come towards them, or to back away from them. They could point with one finger to direct attention to a certain object. There are many others.)

A hand signal is a movement that is intended to communicate a generally accepted meaning. Gestures are also hand movements. Gestures may be intentional or unintentional. Some gestures are habits.

**Q:** Describe some unintentional gestures you make because they are habits? (Write suggestions on a flip-chart or chalkboard. If needed, suggest the following examples to help participants get started.)

Some unintentional gestures might be:

- Putting your hand to your forehead when you have a headache
- Resting your head on your hand when you are thinking
- Biting your fingernails when you are nervous

Gestures have meaning only in the specific situation in which they are used. Not many gestures have just one meaning, because a single gesture can mean something completely different from one situation to another.

### **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

**SAY:** People react to situations differently, depending on their individual personalities and their cultures. Facial expressions vary in different cultures. For example, Japanese people often do not let their emotions show in their facial expressions. According to their culture, it is not proper to impose one's grief or sorrow on another person. They are also less likely to share other emotions. Sometimes when Westerners are working with a Japanese person, they feel frustrated because Westerners like to let emotions show in facial expressions and Japanese people don't. Facial expressions are an important part of communication for people in the United States.

## Module 10 v Activity 5 v RESPECT

**Q:** Which way is correct?

**A:** Both. Neither is wrong. Every culture has its own language of verbal and nonverbal communication. When a person of one culture attempts to communicate with a person from another culture, good communication depends on both parties recognizing and accepting the differences. If they don't, each will misinterpret what the other person means to communicate. Every culture has its own nonverbal language.

Newcomers to the United States who learn the English language also need to learn the nonverbal cues of our culture. If someone uses the English spoken language with the nonverbal rules of another language, there will be confusion and opportunity for misinterpretation.

Because various cultures give different meanings to gestures and other nonverbal cues, a person who moves to (or even just visits) a different culture has to learn the nonverbal language of the local culture along with that culture's spoken language.

Here are some other examples: (Demonstrate each example).

- An Arab who speaks louder and stands closer than we do may be seen as pushy in our culture. We would be misunderstood in his country, as well.
- A Latina who drops her eyes when speaking with a boss may be seen as unassertive. In many Hispanic cultures, when a person considered to be of higher authority is speaking to you, looking down instead of directly into his/her eyes shows respect, not disinterest. In that culture, looking directly at a person speaking to you is rude. Were we to look directly into our boss's eyes as we speak with him, we would seem pushy and rude in a Hispanic country.

Remember Joe, who never looked at the person talking with him. He always looked at the ground or to the side. This habit gave a negative signal, but in another country it could send a positive message.

**Q.** Can you think of other cultural differences in nonverbal communication? (Encourage discussion.)