

INSIGHTS

BEYOND WORDS

How Body Language Influences
Negotiations and Diplomacy

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August 22, 2025

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A positive and constructive opening is essential in high-stakes negotiations, but certain gestures can undermine the tone or send conflicting signals even when they may be well meant, at least by one side. Applause, for example, is generally considered inappropriate in diplomatic settings, and even in business, particularly when outcomes are still uncertain.

During President Trump's recent meeting with President Putin in Alaska, Trump gave the Russian leader a formal red-carpet welcome, complete with applause, a broad smile, and confident body language.

Experts in body language described the greeting as "celebratory", noting that one leader appeared to offer the other a significant display of respect and admiration, similar to welcoming a high-profile guest with a warm handshake. These gestures have sparked debate around the globe about their implications, especially among Moscow's public and Ukrainians affected by the ongoing conflict. The symbolism of the meeting has, in fact, already made an impact.

Putin appears to have scored a clear symbolic win, with the summit reestablishing his position on the international stage. In Moscow, the reaction was immediate. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Western media "spent three years telling everyone Russia was isolated, and today they saw the beautiful red carpet laid out for the Russian president in the US." Meanwhile, American Democrats and Ukrainians were quick to express outrage and concern about the message being sent by such spectacle.¹

Grand gestures like applause may appear welcoming, but in volatile geopolitical contexts, they risk sending the wrong signal. In this case, the applause was more than inappropriate, it may have been politically costly, no matter the cultural context.

Therefore, in both business and political negotiations, gestures and body language matter.

Negotiations mostly rely on verbal communication, where parties exchange ideas through language.

Negotiations mostly rely on verbal communication, where parties exchange ideas through language. However, nonverbal communication - body language - is equally important. It includes posture (habitus), gestures, and facial expressions, all of which convey meaning beyond words. Habitus refers to the overall posture in interpersonal communication, while gestures - like movements of arms and hands - signal feelings and negotiation stances. Facial expressions, such as frowning or raising eyebrows, also send important cues.²

Several recent business articles have focused on the interpretation of body language.³ For instance, in a negotiation, when someone touches their face, it can signal a range of internal emotional states, depending on context and what part of the face they are touching. It often indicates psychological discomfort, but interpretation should always be situational - body language is not absolute. Face touching is often a self-soothing mechanism. Under pressure, like during a negotiation, people unconsciously perform these behaviors to calm themselves or regulate their internal state.⁴

Some examples of touching include touching nose or covering mouth, which is seen as hesitation, doubt or concealment. Rubbing the eyes may mean discomfort, disbelief or resistance.⁵ Scratching or rubbing the face or chin can represent thinking, evaluating and even indecision. Hand on the cheek, resting, may indicate boredom or passive listening.

A final example is frequent or nervous touching such as lip biting and face patting which may reveal anxiety, insecurity or could simply self-soothing and thus an often-subconscious attempt to regulate stress.⁶

Touch is one of the most powerful yet subtle forms of nonverbal communication. Its meaning can shift dramatically depending on context, intent, and cultural norms. According to Heslin's widely cited taxonomy, touch falls into five broad categories: functional/professional, social/polite, friendship/warmth, love/intimacy, and sexual/arousal.⁷

In diplomacy and high-stakes negotiations, these physical gestures are rarely random; they are often deliberate, symbolic acts that communicate authority, trust, empathy - or dominance. Handshakes are perhaps the most studied form of touch. They act as ritualized greetings but are also crucial in setting the tone of an encounter. Academic studies show that a full, firm handshake tends to evoke trust and sincerity, while limp or overly strong handshakes create impressions of weakness or aggression.⁸

For instance, in the specific case of the meeting between Trump and Putin in Alaska, if we look at very first handshake, there is much to interpret. Dr. Peter Collett observed that Putin was the first to extend his hand, i.e., an expression of enthusiasm, delight, and commitment to the occasion. Yet, within the handshake itself, no fewer than five hand pats were exchanged, -

each loaded with nuance. Putin initiated the first pat - tentative and restrained - while Trump's were more assertive. According to Dr. Collett, Trump's hand pats served as a "status reminder," signaling his desire to maintain control and authority.⁹

In many cultures today, holding or shaking hands is a common gesture of politeness and affection. Different research showed that handshake often communicates more than a simple "hello." Often full palm-to-palm contact, not just a firm grip, conveys sincerity and openness. In business and negotiations, a well-balanced handshake with moderate pressure can build trust, yet too much force may signal insecurity, while offering your³ hand palm-down suggests a desire to dominate.¹⁰

In sum, body language can define the tone of a negotiation. In high-stakes diplomacy, these gestures become public messages, interpreted domestically and internationally. Physical cues like handshake styles, eye contact, posture, and facial expressions are not mere accessories to verbal statements: they are central to how power, trust, resistance, or submission are communicated. When leaders meet, the world watches not just what they say, but how they say it, with their bodies and gestures.

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