

The Art Of The Handshake

*Donald Trump Knows The Art of The Deal—
But Does He Know The Art of the Handshake?*

By Olivia Fox Cabane

A Fortune 500 CEO once said that when he had to choose between two candidates with similar qualifications, he gave the position to the candidate with the better handshake.

Is his reaction extreme? Perhaps, but on the other hand, consider the following study conducted at the Incomm Center of Chicago. A quarter was left in the coin return of a public telephone. If a stranger took the coin after using the phone, one of the research students would walk up and ask whether the person had seen the quarter.

Alas for human nature—60% of the people lied, claiming they had never seen the quarter. In the next series of experiments however, when the students introduced themselves with a handshake before asking about the quarter, less than 15% of people lied to the students. The study concluded that the handshake had improved the quality of the interaction producing “a higher degree of intimacy and trust within a matter of seconds.”

Though it may seem inconsequential, a handshake is in fact a serious step in intimacy. In the same manner that animals define and defend their territories, we humans develop a sense of “ownership” for the space around us. This territory, which is but a few inches, is nonetheless a sort of “personal space” bubble, and we react strongly if it is invaded.

The size of the bubble varies by culture and by density of population. For instance, the American bubble is far bigger than its French counterpart. The German requirement for personal space is notoriously large. Personal space needs tend to be smaller in all Latin

countries, but not quite as small as in the Middle East, where a proverb states one must “smell the breath” of a man to know if he is to be trusted.

No matter how large or small the bubble may be, in every case the physical contact involved in a handshake requires that this barrier be suspended, if only for a moment. In the manner of a drawbridge brought down to allow a knight to cross a moat and enter the castle, lowering the personal space barriers to shake hands is an act of trust, and so *creates* trust. In fact, a handshake can be seen as the first step in a relationship.

The first sighting of a handshake is among the Egyptians, in 2800 BC. Since then, across cultures, across hemispheres, the handshake has been surprisingly similar—always, the right hand. This last point is what explains the handshake’s entire *raison d’être*. Think about it— why the right? The right hand is good for a good many things, yes. But in primal, instinctive terms—which is pretty much how we still operate—the right hand and arm are most valued for weapons. Certain sociologists postulate that this may be the reason why the handshake has conventionally been more of a male tradition, as women were less likely to carry weapons.

In Roman times, the handshake was in fact an arm clasp. One man would reach out his weapon hand and clasp just below the elbow of the other, the better to feel for daggers hidden in his sleeves. Medieval knights took this verification one step further, by adding a shake to the clasp, in order to dislodge any hidden weapons the feel-up could’ve missed.

There are, unfortunately, as many types of bad handshakes as there are people, so rather than irk you with an exhaustive list, I’ll mention just a few of the worst offenders. Let’s start with the well-known *knuckle cruncher*.

Yes, it may be a demonstration of machismo. But it could also be the result of a person genuinely unaware of his (or her) strength, or of misguided teachings—some women have been taught that the tougher their shake, the more seriously they will be taken, and hence crush your hand as if their life depended on it.



A strong contender for the best-known baddie is the *dead fish*, where a limp, lifeless hand is extended, and barely shaken. It gets even worse when the hand is cold and clammy. This is, perhaps, the worst of all delinquents—the cruncher at least communicates something, whereas the message sent by the dead fish is completely apathetic. This handshake can ruin an interview before it even begins. If you suspect you have any tendency towards dead fish shakes, you will need to act fast—just like dead fish, the longer they’re ignored, they more they stink.

Another great classic is the *finger squeeze*, which –sadly– certain women believe to be “more feminine” and hence “more appropriate”. But it can also be the result of confusion, bad timing, or over-eagerness (wanting to squeeze too soon). The *pumper* can also give an impression of over-eagerness or insecurity as one person just keeps pumping away, afraid to let go.



Now we get into the lesser celebrities. The *sanitary shake*, where the hand is barely touched, and quickly withdrawn, tends to leave a feeling of rejection. The *pull-in* can start with a good shake, but its ending (directing you towards a certain direction) will ruin any good feelings initially created, and can feel somewhat manipulative.

More direct is the *dominant*, characterized by the hand extended palm down, symbolizing perhaps the intention to “have the upper hand” in the equation. A nasty variation of this would be the *twisting dominant*, where the hand is extended innocently straight, but twists once the shake is initiated to gain the upper hand. If you receive this kind of a shake, watch out! It tells you a thing or two about how this person intends to conduct the relation.

We’ll close this woeful list with the classic *two-handed handshake*. In this case, you’ll also feel the left hand at work, closing in on your hand, wrist, arm, shoulder or neck. It’s also known as the “*politician’s handshake*”... Enough said!



So what, say you, are the ingredients of a perfect handshake? I’m so glad you asked. First things first: Make sure your right hand is free. Shift anything it may be holding—briefcase, purse, etc to your left hand, well in advance, as you don’t want to scramble at the last minute.

Avoid holding a drink in your right, especially if it’s a cold drink; the condensation will make your hand feel

cold and clammy, thus producing the dreaded *dead fish*. If you tend to have clammy hands, just give them a spray of antiperspirant before you leave the house.

Rise if you’re seated, no matter whether you are a man or a woman. And even if you have nothing in your hands, keep them out of your pockets—showing your palms, being open-handed, makes you look more open and honest.

Make sure to use plenty of eye contact, and smile warmly but briefly—too much, and you’d appear overeager. For the same reason, make sure your arm is fully extended—an arm too close to body looks insecure. Keep your head straight, without tilting it in any way, and face the person “heart to heart” to ensure full frontal facing.

You’ll want to keep your hand perfectly perpendicular, neither dominant (palm down) nor submissive (palm up). If you’re in doubt, focus on keeping your thumb pointing straight to the ceiling. Here are the two most important points to remember: first, open wide the space between your thumb and index finger to make sure you get contact between the webs of your thumbs.

Second, ensure contact between the palms of your hands by keeping your palm flat—not cupped—and by draping your hand across theirs in a diagonal. Think of the trapezists’ handshake: you almost have your index finger on their pulse (almost, but not quite). It’s as if you were trying to engulf their hand in yours, embracing their hand.



Once full contact is made, put your thumb down, lock thumbs, and squeeze about as much as they did—firmly, but no more than they. Shake from the elbow (not the wrist), linger for a moment if you want to convey particular warmth, and step back.

Voilà! You have performed a perfect handshake—I knew you could do it.

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