

Hand signals

Hand signals are agreed gestures or shapes that people make with their hands, to communicate in a non-verbal way (e.g. "I want to speak", "I agree", "I don't understand" etc.)

Using hand signals can make workshops and meetings run more smoothly and help the facilitator see emerging agreements and common ground.

There are lots of different hand signals out there, and groups use them in many different ways. They work a lot better if everyone is clear about which signals to use in the session and what exact purpose they have.

For some people hand signals will feel alienating, artificial, or 'like being at school'. These people might become less keen to participate, not more! Notice what's going on in your group, and if the tools aren't having the effect you wanted, try something else.

We find it best to use a small number of hand signals that are clearly explained at the beginning of the meeting. We often find just two signals sufficient: a raised hand or forefinger for wanting to speak, and waving your hands in the air to say you agree.

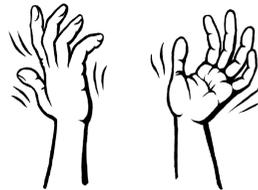
'I want to contribute to the discussion.'

Raise a hand or forefinger when you wish to contribute to the discussion with a general point.



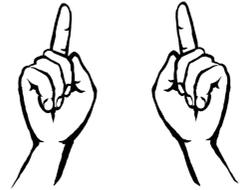
'I agree' or 'Sounds good.'

When you hear an opinion that you agree with, wave your hands with your fingers pointing upwards by the sides of your body, around shoulder/face height. This lets everyone see how many people agree and saves a lot of time as people don't have to say "I'd just like to add that I agree with...". The gesture comes from British Sign Language where it means applause.



Direct Response

Raise both forefingers if your point is a direct response to a point that's just been made or a question that's just been asked. This allows you to jump to the head of the queue, in front of all those people raising just one finger.



It is best to reserve direct response for occasions where there is a clear advantage to the group of your point being heard first. For example, you could use it to interrupt a conversation about train times, by pointing out the trains are on strike and you will need to catch the bus. This option can easily be over-used if people don't fully understand how it is different from raising a single hand.

Language

Make an L shape with your thumb and forefinger to request translation, or to ask someone to use simpler language. This can be especially helpful in any multi-lingual group. Some groups use 'C' for 'clarification' in a similar way.



Technical point

Make a T shape using both hands. We've seen this used in a variety of ways by different groups, so always check you have a shared understanding. One use of 'technical point' is to interrupt the discussion with urgent factual information not related to the meeting (e.g. 'Lunch is ready', 'Can someone help me set up the tea urn for the break.'). Another is to jump the queue with a facilitation suggestion, e.g. 'Can we break into small groups for this conversation?'



Proposal

Make the shape of the letter P to show that you have a proposal. Note: some groups use P to signal a point of process (a suggestion about the facilitation of the meeting).

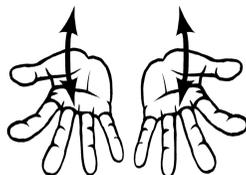


Hand signals to use with caution

Some hand signals can be disempowering. For example, some groups use gestures for 'I disagree' and 'You've been speaking too long'. In general it's less hurtful to communicate these messages in words. We have included some other hand signals below and explained why we have at times found them problematic.

Speak Up

Wave your hands upwards to ask the speaker to speak louder. Very helpful in large groups. For someone who is already nervous about speaking in front of a large group this may add more pressure.



I'm confused

Wriggle your fingers in front of your face if you want to tell the speaker and facilitator that you don't understand the content of the discussion. The sign can come across quite negative to the speaker, and an L shape for language or a C shape for clarification can be a more neutral way of signalling the need for explanation.



Veto

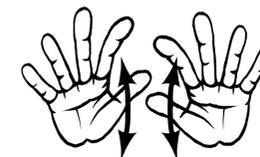
A raised fist expresses a major objection or veto to a proposal. In a large group of 50 or 100 people it can be helpful to have a specific signal for blocking a proposal, as otherwise someone's major objection may be missed. In smaller groups it may be better for the facilitator to ask people to raise their hand if they have a major objection / veto/ block to a proposal, as the raised fist is quite a strong gesture to use and may increase tension in the group.



Slow down

Wave your hands downwards if you want the speaker to slow down. This can be helpful for example in meetings where someone is translating what the speaker is saying into other languages.

However, some groups use a very similar hand signal for showing disagreement, you need to be clear when and how to use it.



Tips for making hand signals work

Think carefully about how many hand signals you actually need. It is tempting to have hand-signals for everything from 'tea break' to 'I want to make a proposal'. However, if you stick to just a few signals, people are more likely to remember what you agreed they would mean.

Explain the hand signals in use clearly at the start of the session. This makes it less intimidating for someone who's turned up new, and doesn't understand what's going on! It also prevents situations where people are using the same signal to mean different things.

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