



# MASTERING

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

### Range of Preferred Level of Eye Contact\*\*

Below are some examples of cultural groups that tend toward a particular range in the preferred level of eye contact continuum, and possible misinterpretations that might occur.

#### Prefer Very Direct Eye Contact

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<b>Groups:</b>	Middle Easterners, some Hispanic groups, the French
<b>Actual Intention:</b>	Desire to express interest; desire to communicate effectively
<b>Possible Misinterpretation:</b>	Hostility, aggressiveness, intrusiveness, bossiness

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#### Prefer Moderate Eye Contact

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<b>Groups:</b>	Mainstream U.S. Americans, northern Europeans, the British
<b>Actual Intention:</b>	Desire not to appear aggressive or intrusive
<b>Possible Misinterpretation:</b>	Lack of interest in what is being said

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## Prefer Very Minimal Eye Contact

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<b>Groups:</b>	East Asians, Southeast Asians, East Indians, Native Americans
<b>Actual Intention:</b>	Desire to show respect; desire not to be seen as intrusive
<b>Possible Misinterpretation:</b>	Lack of interest, dishonesty, lack of understanding, fear, shyness

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*\*\* Adapted from Thiederman (1991), Profiting in America's Multicultural Marketplace.*

## The Meaning of Hand Gestures in Different Cultures

### Handshakes

Shaking hands is an "art," so to speak. You must consider who you shake hands with, when, how often, as well the firmness of your grasp. Thiederman (1991) offers the following variations in what is considered an appropriate handshake across diverse groups:

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U.S. Americans:	Firm
Germans:	Brisk, firm, repeated upon arrival and departure
French:	Light, quick, not offered to superiors, repeated upon arrival and departure
British:	Soft
Hispanics:	Moderate grasp, repeated frequently
Middle Easterners:	Gentle, repeated frequently
Asians:	Gentle; for some, shaking hands is unfamiliar and uncomfortable (an exception to this is the Korean who has a firm handshake)

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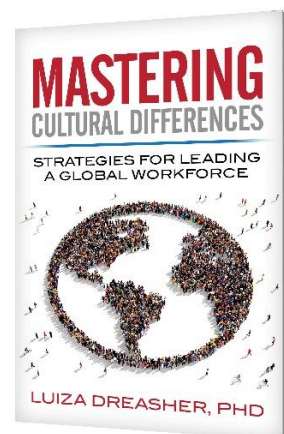
## Other Hand Gestures

When communicating across differences it is important to become more conscious of these differences because our hand gestures can be misinterpreted. When using certain gestures, keep the following cultural differences in mind:

- **Pointing** is often considered poor etiquette in U.S. American culture. Likewise, to point at an Asian with the index finger is offensive and intrusive. In Thailand, China and many other Asian countries, pointing is done with the entire hand. In Malaysia, however, pointing is done with the thumb.
- Mainstream U.S. Americans **beckon** to others with up-turned fingers, palm facing the body. This same gesture is considered offensive to Mexicans, Filipinos (this is how they beckon to animals or prostitutes), and Vietnamese.
- Gestures of **validation** such as the OK sign, the “thumbs-up” signal, the “V” for victory (done with the palm facing the face) are very offensive to many cultures. “All three have sexual connotations, as does the “thumbing-a-ride” gesture.
- While many U.S. individuals may not think much of it, gesturing or handing something with the **left hand** is offensive to many Muslims as this is regarded the “toilet hand” (Thiederman, 1991, p. 140). In fact, the left hand serves a specific purpose – hygiene after the use of the toilet. The right hand is the one used for all social functions such as shaking hands, eating, or handing something to another person.

This content was excerpted from the book

[Mastering Cultural Differences: Strategies for Leading a Global Workforce](#)



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