



What to Do With Your Hands When Speaking

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The most frequently asked question of presentation coaches is “What do I do with my hands?” In [past writings](#), I have cautioned against choreography; I’ve seen far too many presenters attempt to illustrate their narrative with specific gestures and wind up tying themselves into pretzel knots. Instead, use your hands and arms as you do naturally, to illustrate what you are saying. However, I do recommend one gesture: to extend your hand and arm periodically, bridging the gap between you and your audience (as AT&T used to say, “Reach Out”), with your hand in handshake position.

Ronald Reagan provides an alternative point of view. Throughout his career, The Great Communicator rarely used any gestures. A DVD called [*Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator*](#) contains clips from more than 100 public appearances during his eight years as president. In all the clips, he made an expansive gesture with his hands and arms only once.

Reagan had followed this style since his formative years as a presenter. Between the twilight of his days as an actor and the start of his political career as the Governor of California, he spent eight years as a spokesman for General Electric Corporation, which gave him

opportunities to present in many venues. One of them was as the host of GE Theater, an anthology series of television dramas. In one 1954 episode I recently watched, he delivered his introduction standing, framed by stage lights, in front a blank wall of a movie studio. Attired in a smartly tailored tweed coat sprouting a natty pocket kerchief, he had his right arm propped on a stage light and his left hand in his trouser pocket. During the entire introduction, neither arm ever budged.

You might call this the “Look, Ma, no hands!” approach. The style worked — wonders — for Reagan. Would it work for you? The answer, as always, is to do what comes naturally to you.

An unnatural approach is to treat gesturing as performing, which is what speakers who consciously choose the Reagan approach — or any other — are doing. One (~~wrong~~) way to look at it is as a choice between “Anchorperson” or “Weatherperson.” (Thanks to my friend Jeff Paine for sharing this concept.) As we all know from television news programs, Anchorpersons sit stock still at a desk, rarely using their hands; while Weatherpersons wave their hands and arms about broadly to indicate weather patterns on a map. This division parallels the Ronald Reagan no-hands style vis-à-vis the gesture-to-illustrate style, but it does so in the context of performance.

If you are reading this post, it is highly unlikely that you are a performer or that you were auditioned for your position or that you were hired because of your acting skills. You were hired on the basis of the personality you presented during your interview and vetting process; and that personality was your natural style.

Heed the advice of Irving Berlin’s song in the classic musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, “Doin’ What Comes Natur’lly.”

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