

Why Giving Bear Hugs At Work Will Land You in Hot Water

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NEW YORK (MainStreet (<http://www.MainStreet.com>)) — Before you lean over and give your co-worker a big bear hug at the next meeting, figuring out the proper workplace etiquette can help you avoid a major gaffe.

While every workplace has a different set of unwritten rules for appropriate etiquette when it comes to touching someone, some general formalities should be followed so you won't be guilty of a blunder at your office or at professional events such as dinners and conferences.

Unless you are in an industry where physical contact is required such as a massage therapist, doctor, hair stylist or dentist, it is important to keep your hands to yourself, said Diane Gottsman, an etiquette expert and owner of The Protocol School of Texas in San Antonio.

“Bottom line, one person's gesture of goodwill may be another person's opportunity to contact HR or start a firestorm of controversy,” she said.

The only conventional business touch is a handshake, and bosses and supervisors in a position of power should not otherwise touch employees, Gottsman recommended.

Hugs can be the exception to the rule, especially if it is a client who has also become a close friend. If someone greets you with a non-invasive shoulder to shoulder hug, it is best to accept it, but use your best judgment.

“It would be rude to decline a hug by sticking a hand in the person's stomach



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or face for a handshake,” Gottsman said.

While co-workers in a business setting would not normally tend to hug each other, a special circumstance such as landing a huge project may incite a friendly group hug of congratulations, Gottsman said.

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Some managers and co-workers feel that a better alternative to a hug or pat on the back is a genuine smile and verbal praise, she said. Or even better, put the accolade in writing and announce a successful accomplishment at the next staff meeting.

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Vice President Joe Biden’s public display of affection recently at a swearing-in ceremony was deemed a big etiquette faux pas. When he swore in Ashton Carter, the new defense secretary, Biden put both hands on the shoulder of Carter’s wife and whispered something in her ear.

“Hugging and touching someone in a business setting can oftentimes be misconstrued and lead to controversy or confusion,” said Jacqueline Whitmore, an etiquette expert and the founder of The Protocol School of Palm Beach, Fla.

Before you go in for the big hug, always respect another person’s space. Someone’s family background, culture, age and gender play a big part in whether a person will be fine accepting a hug, she said.

“Usually, like a kiss, you can tell from a person’s body language if they are willing to receive a hug or not,” Whitmore said.

One key piece of advice to follow is the three second rule. It is best to keep the hug short and avoid placing your arm too low around the other person. Longer hugs have a certain connotation and could have negative repercussions if a co-worker’s spouse or significant other is present, she said.

Or you can simply ask permission so the receiver will feel respected and have an opportunity to voice his or her comfort level. Unless you know someone extremely well, it’s best to ask, Whitmore said.



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“A hug and an air kiss may be in order if you haven’t seen a co-worker or client for an extended period of time or if you are at a holiday party,” she said. “A hug is not necessary if you see someone on a regular basis.”

If you are at a conference or business lunch and there is a group of people you need to greet, start by saying hello to your new acquaintances by giving them a handshake first and then follow with hugs for the people you know well.

“This way you won’t have to guess if the new people are pro-huggers or anti-huggers and you will show consideration for their boundaries,” Whitmore said.

If you are in doubt at all, it’s best to just skip it and play it safe. You will never go wrong with the good, old-fashioned handshake, she said.

While there are many cultural norms such as the practice of kissing someone on the cheek, your best bet is to watch the other person’s body language and let the person take the lead, Gottsman recommends. Even some people within the same culture may not like receiving a kiss on the cheek from a stranger. In some countries, people only kiss those of the same gender and in other countries, people would be insulted for outstretched arms or lips.

“The bottom line – don’t pucker up or give outstretch arms unless you see the other person initiating the gesture,” Gottsman said. “Do your homework when meeting with different cultures and be aware of the message you are sending.”

In some fields and industries, co-workers are friends with one another, which makes their relationship a bit more casual. Kissing has become the blurred line between work and socializing with work colleagues, said April Masini, an advice columnist based in Naples, Fla. Kissing can be a polite way to greet someone as long as it’s a peck on a cheek that lasts a second. If you work with Europeans, go ahead and greet your colleague with the double-cheek kiss.

The hand on the back is a great way to guide a woman or a man through a doorway, into a car or to help him or her into a seat at a restaurant or a meeting, she said.

“But never ever grab waists and don’t let your hands linger,” Masini said.

“This is how sexual harassment starts.”

If you have to whisper, don’t do it from behind and avoid it while someone is making a presentation.

“It’s creepy and appears predatory,” she said. “Instead, place your ear next to the other person’s ear and whisper with parallel heads. It’s more of an equal opportunity whisper, so that if the whispered upon wants to whisper back, you’re both in position already.”



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