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Company
Plus

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How to Hug in the Work Place

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat blogletter on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

About a year ago, three Chinese-born women working in a company near Philadelphia asked me to practice hugging. During a communications training class, I had mentioned this form of greeting, which they said never occurred among business people in their native Shanghai. A few months later, a Brazilian man in New York wanted me to demonstrate the hip-hop hug. He was curious after seeing two African-American colleagues clasp fingers and touch each other's backs. Then, on a recent assignment in San Francisco working with cross-cultural clients, a Japanese-born man stationed in Peru threw his arms around me in a wildly enthusiastic hug. Responding to my surprise at the out-of-the-blue embrace, he explained that he was trying to imitate the Latino friendliness he had observed in South America.

Coming from an Irish background, where people tend to hug only their relatives, I questioned my competence in responding to these three incidents. Then I came across a story in the Feb. 12 issue of Time Magazine. It was entitled "Are Hugs the New Handshakes?" "If White House etiquette is any indication, you should be getting a random hug soon," the article said. "The Obama family was always cuddly on the campaign trail, and last month the President bestowed no fewer than nine hugs on senior male staffers at a single meeting. But the Hugger-in-Chief didn't start the trend."

What did, according to Time, is the 2006 creation of a movement called the Free Hugs campaign. I completely missed this phenomenon, but hey, Time is Time. Hugging as the new handshake apparently fanned out from there, including a Facebook group called I Love a Good Hug; a fund-raising organization called Hugs for Humanity; and an upcoming Global Hugs Tour. If you type in the word "hugs" in your computer search engine, you'll come up with thousands of timely hits.

Have citizens of United States – thought by many non-Anglo countries to be cool and aloof in business greetings – become a nation of huggers? What about the danger of being sued for sexual harassment? Or of picking up flu germs from every Tom, Dick, and member of the avian species? Or of looking just plain stupid from sticking out your backside to avoid below-the-belt contact?

I don't have a clue – remember hugging in the work place is fairly new to me, too. But, as is my usual philosophy, I recently decided that if you can't beat 'em, hug 'em. Meet Dr. Kathleen Begley, hugger and huggee. If the President's physicians let him throw his arms around dozens of people each day, I figure it's OK for a lesser mortal like me.

Still on the fence about your views on hugging? Here are some additional thoughts to help you decide how to handle this critical issue:

Recognize the benefits. Human touch is a powerful force. Orphans deprived of affection develop almost irreversible personality problems. I honestly think the increasing popularity of business hugging may stem, in part, from the growing number of Americans living alone. The office is their primary source of human interaction. I'm sure current economic fears contribute, too.

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Consider comparative status. Quite frankly, I would never hug a male or female client without their initiating the greeting. In my view, a customer sets the tone.

Ask when in doubt. Occasionally, I'll have a meeting where the other person and I have really hit it off. But I never hug the individual upon leaving without first saying, "I'd love to give you a hug. May I?"

Understand various versions of the hug. If I were you, I'd reserve full frontal bear hugs for super-close business friends. Usually, you'll be better off with the above-the-waist or a one-sided hug.

Factor in culture: To be honest, I was flabbergasted when the man from Japan – usually known for no-touch bows -- threw his arms around me. But the cross-cultural behavior certainly reinforced the idea that the world has become global village.

Beware sexual connotations. You may recall that just last year, actor Richard Gere received strong criticism for having publicly kissed and hugged a Bollywood actress while visiting Asia. For a time, he was banned from India. You certainly don't want to be sending inappropriate signals in the work place.

Honor your own nature. If you dislike hugging so much that you physically recoil when men or women throw their arms around you, by all means say so. The first time I met my father-in-law, he told me point blank that he was not physically affectionate. He said outright that he didn't want to be hugged. Yet, over time, I discovered that he was one of the most loving men I have ever met. For the most part, I succeeded in following his wishes. I had only one slip. It occurred three years ago in a room at a hospice in the Philadelphia suburbs, where my father-in-law spent his last 48 hours. After he took his final breath, I leaned into his deathbed and kissed his forehead. Then, without even realizing what I was doing, I dispensed with all reserve and gave him a hug. He called later from Heaven and said I was forgiven.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.