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Advice for Americans who travel or do business internationally

Business Etiquette - More Than Just Eating with the Right Fork

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By Paula, on May 22nd, 2009

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The Opportunity

Business etiquette is made up of significantly more important things than knowing which fork to use at lunch with a client. Unfortunately, in the

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perception of others, the devil is in the details. People may feel that if you can't be trusted not to embarrass yourself in business and social situations, you may lack the self-control necessary to be good at what you do. Etiquette is about presenting yourself with the kind of polish that shows you can be taken seriously. Etiquette is also about being comfortable around people (and making them comfortable around you!)

People are a key factor in your own and your business' success. Many potentially worthwhile and profitable alliances have been lost because of an unintentional breach of manners.

Dan McLeod, president of Positive Management **Leadership** Programs, a union avoidance company, says, "Show me a boss who treats his or her employees abrasively, and I'll show you an environment ripe for labor problems and obviously poor customer relations. Disrespectful and discourteous treatment of employees is passed along from the top."

The Solution

Most behavior that is perceived as disrespectful, discourteous or abrasive is unintentional, and could have been avoided by practicing good manners or etiquette. We've always found that most negative experiences with someone were unintentional and easily repaired by keeping an open mind and maintaining open, honest communication. Basic knowledge and practice of etiquette is a valuable advantage, because in a lot of situations, a second chance may not be possible or practical.

There are many written and unwritten rules and guidelines for etiquette, and it certainly behooves a business person to learn them. The caveat is that there is no possible way to know all of them!

These guidelines have some difficult-to-navigate nuances, depending on the company, the local culture, and the requirements of the situation.

Possibilities to commit a faux pas are limitless, and chances are, sooner or later, you'll make a mistake. But you can minimize them, recover quickly, and avoid causing a bad impression by being generally considerate and attentive to the concerns of others, and by adhering to the basic rules of etiquette. When in doubt, stick to the basics.

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The Basics

The most important thing to remember is to be courteous and thoughtful to the people around you, regardless of the situation. Consider other people's feelings, stick to your convictions as diplomatically as possible. Address conflict as situation-related, rather than person-related. Apologize when you step on toes. You can't go too far wrong if you stick with the basics you learned in Kindergarten. (Not that those basics are easy to remember when you're in a hard-nosed business meeting!)

This sounds simplistic, but the qualities we admire most when we see them in people in leadership positions, those are the very traits we work so hard to engender in our children. If you always behave so that you would not mind your spouse, kids, or grandparents watching you, you're probably doing fine. Avoid raising your voice (surprisingly, it can be much more effective at getting attention when lower it!) using harsh or derogatory language toward anyone (present or absent), or interrupting. You may not get as much "airtime" in meetings at first, but what you do say will be much more effective because it carries the weight of credibility and respectability.

The following are guidelines and tips that we've found helpful for dealing with people in general, in work environments, and in social situations.

It's About People

Talk and visit with people. Don't differentiate by position or standing within the company.

Secretaries and janitorial staff actually have tremendous power to help or hinder your career. Next time you need a document prepared or a conference room arranged for a presentation, watch how many people are involved with that process (you'll probably be surprised!) and make it a point to meet them and show your appreciation.

Make it a point to arrive ten or fifteen minutes early and visit with people that work near you. When you're visiting another site, linger over a cup of coffee and introduce yourself to people nearby. If you arrive early for a meeting, introduce yourself to the other participants. At social occasions, use the circumstances of the event itself as an icebreaker. After introducing yourself, ask how they know the host or how they like the crab dip. Talk a little about yourself- your hobbies, kids, or

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pets; just enough to get people to open up about theirs and get to know you as a person.

Keep notes on people. There are several "contact management" software applications that are designed for salespeople, but in business, nearly everyone is a salesperson in some capacity or another. They help you create a "people database" with names, addresses, phone numbers, birthdays, spouse and children's names; whatever depth of information is appropriate for your situation.

It's a good idea to remember what you can about people; and to be thoughtful. Send cards or letters for birthdays or congratulations of promotions or other events, send **flowers** for engagements, weddings or in condolence for the death of a loved one or family member. People will remember your kindness, probably much longer than you will!

Peers and Subordinates

Impressing the boss isn't enough.

A 1997 study by Manchester Partners International, says even in this tight job market, 40% of new management hires fail in their first jobs. The key reason for their failure is their inability to build good relationships with peers and subordinates.

Social rank or class is a cornerstone of social interaction in many cultures. The corporate climate in the United States is no exception. People tend to feel uneasy until they've seen an "organizational chart" or figured out who reports to whom. They feel that it is more important to show respect and practice etiquette around superiors than around peers or subordinates.

The current social and economic climate is one of rapid advancement through **technology**, which make it very possible (and even likely) for a pesky salesman to become an important client, or an administrative assistant to become a manager.

Mergers and acquisitions add to this "class mixing," causing a former competitor to become a coworker overnight.

This can make things awkward if you treat people differently depending on their "corporate standing." If you show respect and courtesy to everyone, regardless of position or company, you avoid discomfort or damaging your chances in

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any unexpected turn of events.

Having a consistent demeanor improves your credibility. Even the people at the top will begin to suspect your motives if you treat VIPs with impeccable courtesy and snap at counter clerks.

Superiors

The only thing you owe your boss above and beyond what you owe peers and subordinates is more information. Unobtrusively be sure he or she knows what you're doing, is alerted as early as possible to issues that may arise, and is aware of outcomes and milestones.

Never surprise your boss.

It goes without saying that you should speak well of him or her within and outside the company, and give him or her the benefit of the doubt. (Which you would do for anyone, of course!)

International Business

The information in this article is presented from a Western point of view. It is important to note that etiquette in other cultures requires a bit of adaptation and flexibility. If you're travelling on business to a foreign destination, or have visitors here, it is a good idea to learn as much as you can about the culture they are coming from and make appropriate allowances.

Items to consider:

- Language (make an effort to learn theirs if possible, but don't pretend to be fluent unless you have many years of study under your belt!)
 - Time zones
 - Working schedules
 - Holidays
- Food customs (table manners, use of implements, etc.)

Generally speaking, as long as you are trying to be considerate and express an interest in learning, you should be fine. If in doubt, err on the conservative, formal side.

The Workplace

The remainder of this article is divided into two sections- The Workplace and Social Situations. The division is really for convenience only, since with less formal workplaces and more

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"business"seeming to take place in social situations now than ever before,the lines get blurred.

Meetings

If a subject is important enough to call a meeting,be considerate of the participants'time and ensure that it is well prepared.

Communicate beforehand-

- The objective
- The expected duration (Be sure to observe the ending time scrupulously,unless everyone agrees to continue.)
- Items expected to be discussed

Often overlooked- be sure to THANK meeting members for their time and participation,and demonstrate (in the minutes or written record,at least) how their contributions helped meet the objective of the meeting. Participants are frequently left wondering if they've been heard or if their attendance and contributions were noticed. Distribute minutes or some written record (no matter how simple the meeting) to all attendees and absentees,with concise but complete descriptions of decisions made and including action items.

Never assign an action item to a person who is not present to negotiate it,unless you absolutely have to. Note in the minutes that the person hasn't been notified,and will be contacted for a final disposition of the item.

The Phone

Always return calls. Even if you don't yet have an answer to the caller's question,call and explain what you're doing to get the requested information,or direct them to the appropriate place to get it.

If you're going to be out,have someone pick up your calls or at a minimum,have your answering system tell the caller when you'll be back in the office and when they can expect a call back.

When you initiate a call and get a receptionist or secretary,identify yourself and tell them the basic nature of your call. That way,you'll be sure you're getting the right person or department and the person you're trying to reach will be able to pull up the appropriate information and help you more efficiently.

When you're on the receiving end of a phone call, identify yourself and your department. Answer the phone with some enthusiasm or at least warmth, even if you ARE being interrupted, the person on the other end doesn't know that!

Make sure your voice mail system is working properly and doesn't tell the caller that the mailbox is full, transfer them to nowhere, or ring indefinitely. Address technical and system problems- a rude machine or system is as unacceptable as a rude person.

You don't have to reply to obvious solicitations. If someone is calling to sell you something, you can indicate that you are not interested and hang up without losing too much time on it. However, you do need to be careful. You may be receiving a call from an insurance or long distance company that wants to hire you as a consultant! Be sure you know the nature of the call before you (politely, of course) excuse yourself.

Personalize the conversation. Many people act in electronic media (including phone, phone mail, and e-mail) the way they act in their cars. They feel since they're not face-to-face with a person, it is perfectly acceptable to be abrupt, crass, or rude. We need to ensure that we make best use of the advantages of these media without falling headfirst into the disadvantages.

E-mail

Make the subject line specific. Think of the many messages you're received with the generic subject line, "Hi" or "Just for you."

Don't forward messages with three pages of mail-to information before they get to the content. In the message you forward, delete the extraneous information such as all the "Memo to," subject, addresses, and date lines.

When replying to a question, copy only the question into your e-mail, then provide your response. You needn't hit reply automatically, but don't send a bare message that only reads, "Yes." It's too blunt and confuses the reader.

Address and sign your e-mails. Although this is included in the To and From sections, remember that you're communicating with a person, not a computer.

DON'T TYPE IN ALL CAPS. IT'S TOO INTENSE, and you appear too lazy to type

properly. This is still a written medium. Follow standard writing guidelines as a professional courtesy.

Interruptions

Avoid interruptions (of singular or group work sessions, meetings, phone calls, or even discussions) if at all possible. Most management folks feel free to interrupt informal working sessions of subordinates, but need to realize that they may be interrupting a brainstorming session that will produce the company's next big success.

Always apologize if you must interrupt a conversation, meeting, or someone's concentration on a task. Quickly state the nature of what you need, and show consideration for the fact that you are interrupting valuable work or progress.

Guests, Consultants and New Employees

If you have a new employee, guest, or consultant working at your company for a day, week, or longer, be sure that that person has the resources and information that he or she needs to do the job. This isn't just courtesy, it's good business, since time spent flailing around looking for things is embarrassing to the consultant and expensive for your company..

Give a consultant or guest the same type of workspace as an employee at your company in a similar role. A consultant who is there to do programming should have, if at all possible, the same size cube, type of computer equipment, etc. as an employee programmer would have in your company. This prevents your employees from feeling looked down-upon, and the consultant from feeling singled out or treated as second-rate.

A guest from a regulatory agency will tend to want to know what's "really" going on in the company. By treating him or her like everyone else, (instead of isolating them in a plush office in a far wing, for example) will raise less suspicion and enable them to get the information they need more efficiently.

Appoint an employee to be a 'buddy' to a guest or consultant to ensure that they are introduced around, "shown the ropes," and have someone to help resolve little logistical problems that may arise and cause non-productivity or

embarrassment.

Appreciation / Credit

Always pass along credit and compliments to EVERYONE who made a contribution to the effort. Speak well of your coworkers and always point out their accomplishments to any interested party. Appearing to have taken the credit in a superiors' or customers' eyes is the surest way to sabotage a relationship with a coworker.

Dress / Appearance

It can be insulting to your coworkers or clients to show a lack of concern about your appearance.

Being wrinkled, unshaven, smelly or unkempt communicates (intentionally or not) that you don't care enough about the situation, the people or the company to present yourself respectably.

If in doubt, always err on the side of conservative. If you think jeans may be OK for a social event but aren't sure, show up in ironed khakis and a nice golf shirt. If you think a situation may call for dress slacks, wear a dress shirt and tie. If you have any inkling that a suit may be called for, dress to the nines.

Women's clothing is a bit more complicated, but again, err on the side of conservative and dressy.

Always practice impeccable grooming (even in a jeans environment!)

Social Settings

Many impressions formed during a party, dinner or golf game can make or break a key business arrangement, whether or not business is discussed directly. Always carry business cards. Arrive at a party at the stated time or up to 30 minutes later. (Not earlier than the stated time, under any circumstances.)

Introductions

Before an event, use your address book or your "people database" to refresh your memory about the people you are likely to meet.

If you forget someone's name, you can sometimes "cover" by introducing a person you do know first. "Do you know my Joe Smith, one of our account reps?" which will usually get the

unknown person to introduce him or herself.

If this doesn't work,an admission that you've had a mental block is preferable to obvious flailing around.

Table Manners

These apply to the Americas and most of Europe. If you're elsewhere,do some research beforehand.

The fork goes on the left. The spoon and knife go on the right. Food items go on the left,so your bread plate is on your left. Drinks,including coffee cups,should be on the right. When sitting at a banquet table,you may begin eating when two people to your left and right are served. If you haven't been served,but most of your table has,encourage others to start. Reach only for items in front of you,ask that other items be passed by a neighbor. Offer to the left;pass to the right,although once things start being passed,go with the flow.

This is a lot to consider,and there's a lot more out there. Volumes of information have been written on what is right and correct in business etiquette. It's enough to make veterans and newcomers too insecure to deal with people.

Since you're human,(we're assuming!) there will be times when you step on toes,forget an important name,pop off with a harsh comment,or (heaven forbid!) use the wrong fork. We all do. Think about the "outtakes"scenes at the end of some movies where we see how many times it took to get things perfect,even when everyone was performing to a script! This is real life,there are no scripts,and we're all making it up as we go along.

The important thing to remember is that if you strive to make the people around you feel comfortable and valued,you have succeeded whether you're perfectly in compliance with these or any rules you've read.

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