



Business Etiquette

Business etiquette is a practical and profitable social skill that plays an important role in career success, building better relationships and increasing professionalism. With workplace civility, employees thrive in a positive environment where all are treated with courtesy and respect and are, thus, able to focus on their work. In addition, the ability to successfully relate to, and engage with, managers, co-workers and clients is a key interpersonal skill that employers value highly. Employees who arm themselves with the principles of business etiquette distinguish themselves in the workplace and display a confident professional persona.

Why Etiquette Matters

A lack of respect and value for one another in the workplace has a cost. Employees who are upset about the way they are treated in the workplace are less productive. In addition, employees may respond to disrespect or discourtesy by decreasing contact with, or efforts on behalf of, an offending individual. If the situation continues unresolved, people may seek another position.

Contributing factors for unprofessional, rude behaviors include:

- Increased stress levels at work
- Longer hours in the office
- Heavy workloads
- Pressures to do more in less time
- Customer demands
- Struggles with work/life balance
- External triggers (e.g., personal issues, commute hassles, etc.)

- Working in close proximity
- A lack of understanding of/sensitivity to diversity in the workplace (e.g., age, gender, culture, work styles, perspectives)
- Depersonalization of the communication process through the extensive use of e-mail
- Emotional contagion. Studies indicate that emotions are contagious, and negative emotions lead to a greater emotional contagion than positive emotions.

These factors decrease both business productivity and employee job satisfaction.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is vital to success in the business world. It is essential to be conscious of how your behavior affects others. People may be unaware of their behavior and its consequences. In many cases, behavior that is perceived as disrespectful or discourteous is unintentional and could be avoided by mindfulness and the consistent application of the principles of business etiquette. In a business environment, first impressions are lasting; a second chance may not be possible. The knowledge and practice of etiquette offers a valuable advantage in creating and maintaining a positive impression.

Fostering Positive Work Relationships

Building and maintaining positive work relationships is an important facet of workplace success. These positive relationships can play a key role when it comes time for management to assign coveted projects and award promotions, raises and bonuses.



Principles of Business Etiquette

Your behavior is the foundation upon which positive relationships are created. The following principles of business etiquette should define all of your business relationships:

- Respect
- Courtesy
- Collaboration
- Non-aggression

Most people understand that they need to treat superiors and clients with respect. They may not, however, be as mindful of their relationships with peers and subordinates. Keep in mind that work environments can and do change rapidly. You never know who you may be called upon to work with in the future. The best practice is to establish and maintain good working relationships with all you come into contact with. By being mindful and consistently applying the principles of business etiquette you build positive work relationships, increase your opportunities for success and make your workplace a more pleasant place.

Workplace Relationship Skills

The following skills are essential for building positive work relationships:

Communication:

- Be a good listener. Use verbal and non-verbal cues to demonstrate you are focused on what the other person has to say.
- Think before you speak. Consider what you want to communicate and choose your words carefully. Be mindful of how you speak—don't raise your voice, use harsh tones or use profanity. Speak like a professional and you will be perceived as one.
- Don't interrupt.
- Avoid miscommunication—clarify by summarizing and repeating back what you heard. Ask questions if you don't understand.

- Aim for face-to-face communications as opposed to voice-mail or e-mail.
- Be diplomatic.
- Emphasize the use of courtesy and respect in all communications.

Conflict Resolution:

- Approach conflict as situation-related as opposed to person-related. Focus on the problem not the person.
- Be positive and goal oriented. Offer solutions and suggestions for fixing the problem.
- Be clear and specific. Don't say, "John, I can't do anything with this report. It's all wrong. Fix it!" Instead say, "John, the Q1 data was used but we need Q2 data, can you make that change to the report today?"
- Be proactive instead of reactive. Respond with solutions rather than complaints.
- Be slow to anger, particularly regarding insignificant issues. Being perceived as cool-headed and rational adds weight to your responses.
- Keep an open mind. Listen to the other person's point of view without interrupting or arguing and strive for a win-win solution.
- Accept feedback—whether positive or negative—with poise and without becoming defensive. It speaks volumes about your professionalism.
- Never criticize a co-worker or employee in front of others.
- If you find yourself in a disagreement with someone, don't air your differences in public. Find a private location to discuss the issue.

Support and Appreciation:

- On group projects be sure to credit and compliment everyone who contributed.
- Speak well of your co-workers and acknowledge their accomplishments.

- Never take credit for someone else efforts.
- Acknowledge co-workers' birthdays, promotions, engagements, weddings, new children or the death of a loved one. Such thoughtfulness leaves a lasting impression.

Magic Words:

These expressions are too often forgotten in business but what a difference they can make. Use them!

- Please
- Thank you
- Good Job!
- Great Idea
- Pardon Me
- I'm Sorry

Common Etiquette Challenges in the Workplace

Here are some etiquette challenges that are typically faced in the workplace:

Distracting Behaviors

Recent studies have shown that behaviors that interfere with work performance rated highest among employees' "pet peeves." An office loud talker is one of the biggest irritants, followed closely by loud or annoying cell phone ring tones.

Consider the following suggestions:

- Be aware of how loudly you are speaking. Don't shout over cubicle walls.
- Set your cell phone to silent or vibrate.
- Be mindful of where you conduct work-related conversations to ensure they don't disturb the work of others.
- Keep personal conversations outside workspaces (or better still outside the office). Keep personal telephone calls—and e-mails—brief and to a minimum.
- If you play music in your workspace, be sure only you can hear it.

Common/Shared Areas

Workplace common areas, such as kitchens and lunchrooms, can be the biggest source of co-worker tension. Help maintain supplies, wash and return items to their proper places, clean spills and wipe countertops and tables as needed. When leaving food items in a shared refrigerator, mark all items with your name and date and remove all items at the end of your work week.

Restrooms run a close second as potential sources of conflict. After use, wipe the countertop and sink of any spilled water or soap. Be sure the toilet area is clean for the next user. Notify the proper attendant if supplies are low or out and if there are any maintenance issues.

When eating at your desk or in shared areas avoid eating food with a strong odor that may permeate the office.

Keep shared office equipment in working condition. Refill paper and fix or notify the proper person if office equipment is not working properly. Return equipment to the original settings if you have to change them—such as when printing multiple copies, using legal size paper or making two-sided copies.

Personal Consideration

- Don't borrow items from a co-worker's desk without permission and return borrowed items in working condition.
- Keep your personal workplace clean and neat. Generally, less is better when it comes to office and cubicle decor. Use discretion when displaying personal items such as family photos and mementos so as not overdo or clutter your work area.
- Be on time. If you encounter an unavoidable delay, make every attempt to contact any person or group who may be waiting for you. Always allow extra time if you have to travel
- Sharing professional information is a wonderful thing. Gossiping and sharing overly personal information is not.

Maintaining a Professional Appearance and Presence

Wardrobe

The way you dress sets a tone and sends a message. For both men and women, simple, well-cut clothes that flatter your shape/figure are the typically the best choice. Be sure to always look in the mirror—front and back. Keep in mind the adage, “dress for the position you want, not the position you have.”

Be aware of and follow your company’s dress code. If there is no a formal dress code, follow the lead of those around you. In most companies, the following are not considered appropriate: tight fitting, low cut clothing; ripped or torn clothing; extremely short skirts or shorts; fitness attire such as sweat-pants, bicycle shorts, and running tights.

Personal Hygiene and Grooming

Your physical appearance, including grooming, dress and body language makes up 50 percent of your first impression. Practice good bodily and dental hygiene. Hair, including facial hair, should be clean, styled and neat. Personal grooming, such as filing, cleaning or clipping your nails, applying makeup or combing your hair should not be done in public. Use perfume or cologne sparingly.

Body Language and Non-Verbal Messages

The vast majority of communication—93 percent—is non-verbal; words only account for seven percent of a person’s communication. Your body language—including your facial expression, posture, position and movement of your hands, arms, legs and feet—conveys a lot of messages. You can appear engaged, interested, concerned, sympathetic, disgusted, bored, nervous or anxious without uttering a word.

Body language can be difficult to control. Make sure that your body language reflects your words and intentions. When speaking

with someone, try not to slouch, fidget, crowd the other person, look around the room or play with your hair or jewelry. Use your posture and eye contact to indicate that you are focused on the other person and what they are saying.

Personal Space

Be aware of, and respect, personal space and conversational comfort zones. Don’t stand too close or too far from someone when having a conversation.

The standard North American comfort zone for communication is three feet. Remember that the communication comfort zones differ in other cultures, so do your research if you are conducting international business.

Meeting and Greeting

Meeting and introducing people (including introducing yourself to someone you haven’t met before) can be just as nerve-wracking as public speaking. Here are a few tips:

- When greeting someone, rise if you are seated, smile, extend your hand and make eye contact.
- Use a firm handshake—lasting three to four seconds or two to three pumps—and let go.
- If you are making an introduction and you forget someone’s name, don’t panic. Look the person directly in the eye and with a sincere smile, say “I’m sorry, but your name just slipped my mind. Could you remind me?” Then continue as if nothing happened.
- When you encounter someone whose name you’ve forgotten you can also try using the classic greeting of extending your hand and stating your name. The majority of people will respond to this prompting by shaking your hand and saying his or her own name.

Workplace Communication Tools

Phone

Business over the telephone incorporates a wide range of encounters with co-workers and clients—for example, placing an order, setting up an appointment, getting help with a problem or discussing an important issue. A well-handled phone call can make all the difference in successfully navigating these encounters.

Here are some basic rules of thumb to keep in mind when doing business over the phone:

- Speak clearly.
- Ask permission before using a speaker-phone. Many people are uncomfortable conversing this way.
- Identify yourself when making a call and when answering the phone. Don't assume the other person will recognize your voice. Many companies have policies on how they want employees to answer the phone. If your company has such policies, learn and follow them.
- Return calls promptly. If you don't yet have an answer to the caller's question, explain what actions you are taking to get the requested information or direct them to the appropriate place to get it.
- Avoid putting callers on hold. If you think you'll need to put a caller on hold for more than a few seconds, ask permission first and offer to end the conversation and call back later.
- Leave clear, concise and detailed voice-mail messages giving only the critical information.
- Never eat, chew gum, or drink while using the telephone.
- Become familiar with your phone's features—such as answering another line, transferring calls or making a conference call—before you actually use them.
- Don't use voice mail as a way to screen calls.

E-mail

E-mail is an effective and important communication tool but it should not be used as the exclusive means of communicating. Composing an e-mail, waiting for a response, replying and so-on may not be the most efficient way to discuss an issue that could be more quickly resolved by a conversation in real time.

E-mail also depersonalizes communication. Freed of direct contact, people may say things that they wouldn't if they were speaking in-person. In addition, without non-verbal cues, communications are easily misconstrued.

Use e-mail wisely by being thoughtful and practicing good etiquette:

- Be thoughtful about the kind of information you send via e-mail. A good rule to follow is to never put anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't say in public. Remember: e-mail messages don't go away. Old messages can come back to haunt you.
- Make the subject line specific to the content of your message.
- Keep your messages concise and to the point.
- Double-check names and e-mail addresses in the subject line to ensure they are correct.
- Abbreviations and emoticons are inappropriate in business writing, including e-mails. The recipient may not be aware of their meaning and they make your communication seem unprofessional.
- When forwarding messages, delete information that is irrelevant or extraneous to the subject of the message.
- When replying to messages, do not delete relevant information.
- Avoid typing in all caps—it's like SHOUTING!
- Be thoughtful when you forward messages. Consider asking the sender for permission before you forward their e-mail.

- Stick to business. Work e-mail is not for personal messages.
- Don't circulate jokes, chain letters, suggestive or offensive material. Be mindful that your co-workers may not share your sensibilities and may find this material inappropriate or offensive.
- Avoid using HTML stationary. It can be distracting and may cause errors in some e-mail systems.
- Proof-read and spell check your messages.
- Maintain a professional tone and follow standard writing guidelines by including a salutation, complete sentences, appropriate capitalization, punctuation and a closing.
- Don't use e-mail to avoid talking to someone.
- Many companies have written policies and guidelines governing appropriate use of telephone and e-mail systems. If your company has such policies, become familiar with them and follow them.

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