

Handshakes to Emails: Business Etiquette You Should Know

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What's the difference between the rising star whose career is picking up speed and his counterpart who can't seem to get the engine to turn over? Often, the star has mastered the nuances of business etiquette – the subtle but critical behaviors that can make or break an important meeting, influence a first impression or impress a potential client.

According to Hilka Klinkenberg, director of Etiquette International, a business etiquette firm, the basics of professional etiquette are really quite simple. First, understand the difference between business etiquette and social etiquette. Business etiquette is genderless. For example, the traditional chivalrous etiquette of holding the door open for a woman is not necessary in the workplace and can even have the unintended effect of offending her. In the work environment, men and women are peers.

Second, your guiding principle should always be to treat people with consideration and respect. Although this may seem obvious, Klinkenberg cites this basic decency as a frequent casualty in today's workplace.

Here are a few of the specific dos and don'ts of business etiquette you are likely to encounter during your workday.

Introductions

The proper way to make an introduction is to introduce a lower-ranking person to a higher-ranking person. For example, if your CEO is Mrs. Jones and you are introducing administrative assistant Jane Smith to her, the correct introduction would be "Mrs. Jones, I'd like you to meet Jane Smith." If you forget a person's name while making an introduction, don't panic.

Proceed with the introduction with a statement such as, "I'm sorry, your name has just slipped my mind." Omitting an introduction is a bigger faux pas than salvaging a botched introduction.

Handshakes

The physical connection you make when shaking hands with someone can leave a powerful impression. When someone's handshake is unpleasant in any way, we often associate negative character traits with that person. A firm handshake made with direct eye contact sets the stage for a positive encounter.

Women take note: To avoid any confusion during an introduction, always extend your hand when greeting someone. Remember, men and women are equals in the workplace.

Electronic Etiquette

Email, faxes, conference calls and cellphones can create a veritable landmine of professional etiquette. Just because you have the capability to reach someone 24/7, it doesn't mean you should.

Email is so prevalent in many of today's companies that the transmission of jokes, spam and personal notes often constitute more of the messages employees receive than actual work-related material. Remember that your email messages are an example of your professional correspondence.

Professional correspondence does not include smiley faces or similar emoticons. Faxes should always include your contact information, date and number of pages included. They should not be sent unsolicited – they waste the other person's paper and tie up the lines.

Conference-call etiquette entails introducing all the participants at the beginning of the call so everyone knows who is in attendance. Since you're not able to see other participants' body language and nonverbal clues, you will have to compensate for this disadvantage by communicating very clearly.

Be aware of unintentionally interrupting someone or failing to address or include attendees because you can't see them. And finally, don't put anyone on speakerphone until you have asked permission to do so.

Cellphones can be a lifesaver for many professionals. Unfortunately, if you are using a cell, you are most likely outside your office and may be preoccupied with driving, catching a flight or some other activity. Be sensitive to the fact that your listener may not be interested in a play-by-play of traffic or the other events you are experiencing during your call.

Even if you have impeccable social graces, you will inevitably have a professional blunder at some point. When this happens, Klinkenberg offers this advice: Apologize sincerely without gushing or being too effusive. State your apology like you mean it, and then move on. Making too big an issue of your mistake only magnifies the damage and makes the recipient more uncomfortable.

* <http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/workplace-issues/business-etiquette-you-should-know/article.aspx>