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Mind your manners

Have you ever been out to a nice dinner event and saw someone put their salad with the dressing on it in their hand and eat it? Or, maybe you were at a Black Tie affair and saw most of the salad and bread crumbs all over the floor where they sat.

Business etiquette is made up of significantly more important things than knowing which fork to use at the dinner table with a client. People may feel, if you can't be trusted not to embarrass yourself in social situations, you may lack the self-control necessary to be good at what you do in business.

Etiquette is about presenting yourself with the kind of polish that demonstrates 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.

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Basic knowledge and practice of etiquette are a valuable advantage because, in a lot of situations, a second chance may not be possible or practical. Hearing one say, I have been to so many of these dinners but them not knowing they embarrassed themselves at everyone, is almost hysterical.

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!

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. And, 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 such as sitting at a table and yelling over three others to speak to someone you know. The best practice would be to get up and go over or just wave until you get the chance to be closer.

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.

These rules are not just about dining but about being professional during these times. There was a saying when I was growing up… when someone saw you doing something stupid, they would say, “They have no home training.”

When you see coworkers walking around the job, eating but leaving a trail of food then you find crumbs in the copy machine and they deny it was them, you instantly revert back to that old saying.

Phone etiquette is very important too. Remember the client does not always need to know the companies dirty laundry. Always return calls. Even if you don’t 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 voicemail system is working properly and doesn't tell the caller the mailbox is full then 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.

Have you realized that one is always in your business and not being able to take care of their own? 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.

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 okay 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.

And, always practice impeccable grooming (even in a jeans environment!)