Etiquette – Workplace Behavior that Makes a Difference

The way you present yourself at work has an impact on your co-workers and your work environment. Workplace etiquette refers to the kinds of social behaviors that are acceptable in the workplace. It is the guidelines or manners that make people comfortable, including behavior related to how you dress, your attitude and temperament, your hygiene, how you interact with your co-workers, your use of technology, and your timeliness. While manners may change with the times, the underlying etiquette principles of respect, consideration and honesty remain.

How you behave can make all the difference in your employment success. In many cases we know the difference between “right and wrong” at the workplace. However, sometimes we might not be aware of the etiquette mistakes we are making. Taking note of these tips for proper workplace behavior will make all the difference in your ability to Keep that Job!

COMMUNICATION

*The Basics:* Good communication makes the work environment more productive and pleasant. The basics we learned as children still apply: say please, thank you, and you’re welcome. Use your inside voice. Don’t raise your voice, and don’t use offensive language. When addressing others, do so formally and politely, and don’t interrupt others when they are speaking.

*Body Language:* Respect your co-workers by giving them your full attention. Face the other person and make eye contact. Pay attention to your body language. When greeting someone to your workspace, stand up.

*With your boss:* To maintain a good relationship with your boss, keep him or her informed so there are no surprises. Share information about delays, setbacks, new developments or concerns. Ask the questions you need to ask in order to do your job most effectively. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

*Managing your emotions:* Whenever you find yourself upset or dealing with an issue at work, the best response is to wait, process your thoughts, and think through your words before you voice a complaint, thought, or suggestion. Think before you speak; bite your tongue before an inappropriate or provocative remark can emerge. When on the receiving end of constructive feedback, listen to the words and feelings of others and don’t dispute what they are feeling. You can’t change what someone feels; a good response is “I’m sorry you feel that way.”
Taboo topics: Be careful what you talk about. Don’t overshare about your personal life, gossip about others or openly criticize your peers. Avoid discussing politics, religion, sex and salaries. Personnel matters should only be discussed with the specific individual involved, your superiors, and management. Keep your personal problems out of the workplace.

**Doing Your Job**

*Time management:* Arrive at work 10 to 15 minutes early. This demonstrates respect for the job and your employer, as well as an eagerness for the job. It also provides an opportunity to interact with your co-workers before you begin your day. Also be willing to stay late; this also shows respect and dedication.

Show respect for your co-workers’ time. Being on time or early for meetings and other appointments will go a long way in fostering workplace harmony. Meet deadlines. Return messages and respond to requests in a prompt manner. Whenever possible, schedule your absences in advance so that you co-workers can prepare. Show co-workers and customers that they are your top priority.

Pay attention, learn all you can, and anticipate what will be required of you. Be a self-starter. Don’t expect your boss to regularly tell you to carry out your routine tasks and responsibilities. Pitch in and help others.

*Attitude:* Whether or not you like your job, respect it by taking pride in a job well done. Do what you are asked to do and choose to be productive. Be willing to do the “dirty work” – tasks no one likes but are crucial for business operations. Leave your personal problems and negative attitudes at home; be fully present mentally and physically when you are at work. How you present yourself will have an influence on how others treat you.

Smile and be energetic! You only have one opportunity to make a good first impression. Be respectful to everyone; all roles in the workplace are interconnected. Kindness, courtesy, friendliness and an acknowledgment of the efforts of others will go a long way towards creating a positive work environment. You may even notice a change in the behavior of your co-workers.

Keep your integrity and do the right thing, even if you are doing it alone. Your behavior matters and will be noticed. Don’t lower yourself to the lesser standards held by someone else; there’s no reason to follow the bad behavior of a co-worker.

*Accept responsibility:* None of us is perfect and we will make mistakes at work. It is very poor etiquette to pass blame off on a co-worker. Accepting responsibility for our errors shows a mature confidence and will ultimately invite respect.
**OPEN AND COMMUNAL WORK SPACES**

**Cubicles:** In many workplaces employees work in open areas or cubicles. While this structure easily invites interruptions, be mindful of the personal space and boundaries of your co-workers. Don’t just barge in; try to announce yourself with a knock or by saying “Excuse me” or “knock knock”. Furthermore, pause before entering and wait for a response, and ask if it’s a good time to talk. Don’t loiter outside the cubicle waiting for your co-worker to get off the phone. Whenever possible, try to enter a shared space within the sight line of your co-worker.

When in another’s cubicle, respect your co-workers’ privacy and ownership. Don’t read their computer screens or comment on overhead conversations. Don’t borrow supplies or personal belongings from another’s space.

Finally, be mindful of the noises emanating from your cubicle. Holding a meeting in your cubicle can be distracting for those nearby, so whenever possible go to a separate room for impromptu meetings. Likewise, your telephone and audio devices can disturb others, so keep the volume low and turn them off when you leave the cubicle. Remember, your neighbors can hear your end of your conversations; speaking quietly and using email or text messaging instead will reduce the volume and protect your privacy. Take care of personal matters outside of work or in a private area. Avoid noisy activities like toe or pen tapping, gum snapping, etc., and leave the personal hygiene for home!

**Kitchen:** Clean up after yourself and don’t expect others to do it. Be careful not to burn food in the microwave and avoid using it to heat up smelly food like fish. Wash and return dishes to their proper place. Mark your items in the refrigerator with your name and a date; don’t leave old food in there to become a science experience. Never, ever take someone else’s food unless it is offered.

**Bathrooms:** Clean up after yourself in the restroom. Replenish supplies and replace toilet paper and paper towel rolls.

**Copiers and faxes:** Keep all shared electronic equipment in a “like new” condition. Fix your paper jams, fill empty paper drawers, and let those with small copy jobs go ahead of you.

**Hallways and elevators:** These are perfect places to have positive and friendly interactions with your co-workers so don’t isolate yourself by routinely checking your cell phone for messages or wearing music headphones. Otherwise you are sending an unfriendly message that you want to be alone.

**HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF**

**Clothing:** While dress codes have relaxed significantly over the years, it is best nonetheless to be careful in how you dress and wear attire appropriate for your office. What you wear communicates how you see yourself and is also a representation of your employer. A sloppy or slovenly appearance may suggest to your co-workers and to clients that they, or your company, aren’t worthy of the respect that comes when you present yourself respectably. Avoid revealing, low-cut or sexy clothing. Become
familiar with your employer’s dress code and follow it. Dressing professionally generally causes one to act more professionally.

**Smells:** At a minimum smells at work can be distracting or annoying. In the case of allergies, they can even be dangerous. So avoid perfume and aftershave, and enjoy your pungent lunch or snacks in the lunchroom instead of at your desk. If you do eat at your desk, eat quietly and avoid slurping. Consider keeping an unscented air freshener handy. If you have a problem with a co-workers scent, it’s okay to address it directly to them. Say something short and clear such as “Joe, you know how these cubicles are. The smell of your lunch is drifting over the wall and it’s rather distracting.”

**Hygiene:** Come to work with clean clothes, clean hair, and a clean body. Furthermore, keep your personal grooming private.

**Use of Technology**

**Cell phones:** Do not use your cell phone to carry out personal business at work. If you must talk on your cell phone, watch your volume and whenever possible, move to a private area to talk. Respect the personal space of others and move at least 10 feet away. Never look at your cell phone or read email or text messages while in a meeting. Better yet, don’t take your cell phone into a meeting. Finally, when talking to others, looking at your cell phone is simply rude.

**E-mails:** Write clear, specific and concise message. Be careful in crafting your email, checking for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. Double check the recipient names before hitting “send”. Don’t keep sending emails expecting a response if you’ve received an out of office message from the recipient. Respond to messages by the end of the day, if only to advise that a more thorough response will follow. Finally, remember that email is not private; never write anything you wouldn’t want anyone else – or everyone else – to read.

**Web Browsing:** Limit your personal actions on the workplace computer. Unless allowed by the organization during your break time, do not surf the Internet or go into Facebook or your personal email while on company time. Be aware that employers are able to monitor computer use with special software and they can identify what sites you have visited and for how long. Stay focused on your work.

**Harassment**

Federal and state law prohibits workplace harassment, identified as “unwelcome verbal or physical conduct - based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability or sexual orientation - that creates a hostile work environment.” Behavior that in the past may have been considered simply “joking around” should be avoided in today’s workplace.
**Gender Neutrality**

*Etiquette is Gender Neutral:* Back in the day the rule was that men held doors for women. Now, of course, the workplace is filled with women and the guidelines about manners have changed. Here are some general suggestions.

- **Holding a door:** The first to arrive holds it for others.
- **Getting off elevators:** The person closest to the door exits first.
- **Paying for meals:** Whoever invites, pays.
- **Greeting someone:** Male or female, it’s best to stand to greet someone, particularly a higher level co-worker, customer or client.
- **Helping to carry something:** We all appreciate help when overloaded so regardless of gender, lend a helping hand.

**In a Nutshell**

*Basic Workplace Etiquette:*

- a) Come to work clean and well rested;
- b) Dress in accordance with your employer’s dress code.
- c) Don’t distract others from their work unnecessarily.
- d) Speak quietly so your voice doesn’t carry across the work areas of your co-workers.
- e) Clean up after yourself.
- f) Respect your colleagues’ property and food.

**Sources**

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