

Business Etiquette and Manners

15 Time-tested Rules of Better Behavior

As times change, so do social norms for personal and professional behavior, but that doesn't mean basic etiquette doesn't matter. Performance and quality are important, too, of course, but not exclusively. We sometimes forget that business is about people. There is no shortage of competent and reliable people in the business world and manners can make the difference. Wouldn't you rather collaborate with, work for or buy from someone who has high standards of professional behavior?

How well do you follow these Rules of Better Behavior at your training site?

1. When in doubt, introduce others.

Always introduce people to others whenever the opportunity arises, unless you know that they're already acquainted. It makes people feel valued, regardless of their status or position.

2. A handshake is still the professional standard.

Not only does this simple gesture demonstrate that you're polite, confident and approachable, it also sets the tone for any potential future professional relationship. In a very casual work atmosphere, you might be able to get away with a nod or a hello, but it's worth it to make the extra effort to offer your hand.

3. Always say "Please" and "Thank you."

This should go without saying, but even in a very casual professional atmosphere, this basic form of courtesy is still imperative. Today, sending a thank you e-mail is perfectly acceptable, but a handwritten thank you note is always a nice touch.

4. Don't interrupt.

We've become a nation of "over-talkers," so eager to offer our own opinions or press our point that we often interrupt others mid-sentence. It can be tongue-bitingly difficult to force ourselves not to interject, especially when the discussion is heated. Don't. It's rude and shows disrespect for the opinions of others. Remember, be assertive, not aggressive.

5. Watch your language.

Verbal and written communications are often much less formal than in times past, but be careful to choose your words wisely. Of course, derogatory, rude or offensive language is unacceptable, but so is slang. While it may be commonplace in our society, it's never acceptable in a professional atmosphere.

6. Double check before you hit send.

While we're on the subject of communication, always check your e-mails for spelling and grammar errors. Since the advent of spell check, there is no excuse for typos. Also, do a quick read to make sure the meaning and tone are what you wish to convey. And no smileys, please.

7. Don't walk into someone's office unannounced.

It's disrespectful to assume that you have the right to interrupt other people's work. Knock on the door or say hello if it's open and ask if it's a good time to talk. If the discussion is going to take more than a few minutes, it's a good idea to call or e-mail and schedule a good time for both of you.

8. Don't gossip.

It's so hard sometimes to resist engaging in a little "harmless" gossip. But the reality is that gossip is never harmless. It is most certainly damaging to the subject of the gossip, but it also reflects poorly on you. It's natural to be curious and interested in what other people are doing, but talking about someone who is not present is disrespectful.

9. Don't eavesdrop.

Everyone is entitled to private conversations, in person or over the phone. The same goes for e-mail; don't stand over someone's shoulder and read their e-mails.

10. Acknowledge others.

When someone approaches you, acknowledge him or her. If you're in the middle of something important, it's fine to ask them to wait a minute while you finish. If you pass someone in the hallway or on the street, but don't have time to talk, at least wave a hand and say hello. Busyness is not an excuse to ignore people.

11. Avoid the "Big Two."

We have blurred many of the personal and professional lines, but politics and religion are still off-limits. These topics are highly charged minefields for a professional atmosphere. Leave them at the office door.

12. Be on time.

We're all busy. Being punctual shows others that you value their time. Being late doesn't mean that you're busier than other people; it just means that you're inconsiderate.

13. No phone during meetings.

When you're in a meeting, focus on the meeting discussion. Don't take calls, text or check e-mail. It's disrespectful to the other attendees, not to mention, extremely annoying. It also makes meetings last longer because the participants keep losing focus.

14. Don't be a business card pusher.

Don't simply hand out business cards to everyone you meet. It's a bit aggressive unless you're on a sales call. Ask for the other person's card, offer to exchange cards or at the very least, ask if you can leave your card before you reach in your pocket.

15. Show genuine interest.

Keep eye contact and make an effort to truly listen to what others are saying. We are so easily distracted in this climate of increasingly short attention spans; we often can't wait for the other person to hurry up and finish so we can move on to the next thing. Resist the lure of distraction and haste. Take the time to ask questions and show an interest in the other person's thoughts.

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