

**PROTOCOL AND ETIQUETTE
IN THE WORKPLACE
THE ESSENTIAL RULES OF GOOD BUSINESS ETIQUETTE**

'Good manners are the art of making those people easy with whom we converse. Whoever makes the fewest persons uneasy is the best bred in the company'

Jonathan Swift – 1720

What Jonathan Swift wrote nearly 300 years ago still applies today. It is important to make those around you feel at ease; to show consideration for the people you work with, regardless of whether they are above or below you in the company structure. This does not mean that you have to constantly flatter everyone around you – this will soon be sickening to everyone who comes in contact with you.

Simply having respect for others and doing your job to the best of your ability will get you a long way. If you stick to the following essential rules, you will go much further than you expect.

Honesty

There is no substitute for honesty. You should be scrupulously honest at all stages of your career.

There will be many, many occasions on which your honesty and your integrity will come under scrutiny and it is how you act on these occasions that will pave the way for your future.

Consideration

Being able to listen to others, to consider their thoughts and their feelings (usually before speaking and acting) is the basis of consideration. Being consistently considerate will take you far both in and out of the workplace.

In a South African context, there is an added dimension in that you need to show consideration for people who come from cultures and background that might be different to our own.

Offering help where help is needed and showing respect at all levels is equally important.

Good manners

Many people today maintain that good manners are a thing of the past, and that young people know little about them. The latter may be true, but those who do not have good manners will find that they won't get very far in the business world unless they can learn them very quickly. Whether you are dealing with people on the telephone, face-to-face in the office, at lunch, or socially, your actions are determined by your manners, and the amount of respect that you win is often directly proportional to your manners.

Indeed, good manners are the foundation on which a successful business career is based.

Discretion

The old saying 'Hear no evil, See no evil, Speak no evil' applies at all times in the workplace.

The golden rule is to be thoughtful towards other, and to always keep your thoughts to yourself.

'Passing on' office gossip may benefit someone, but it's most unlikely to be you.

You will get much further by being loyal to your firm than you ever will by being the office gossip. Sensitivity comes into play here and it is important to curb the tendency to pass on information, even though it often seems to be a natural tendency over which you have little control.

Personal matters

Sometimes it's hard not to bring your personal problems to work. But if you apply the golden rule of 'Don't bring your personal life to work with you', you won't go far wrong.

Work is work and home life is home life. The workplace is not the place to deal with your domestic problems. No boss wants to constantly 'catch' you on the telephone to your friends or family discussing personal matters.

If it's a matter that could affect your work, the best way is to discuss it with your employer and see how you can most effectively resolve the problem without it affecting your work.

Responsibility

How you look at responsibility depends on whether you are seeking to be given responsibility, or whether you have the power to allocate responsibility.

There is nothing worse than to be sitting in a job, waiting to be given a task that really matter, but it's never you who is asked to do what seem to be the really important work. You will almost certainly begin to feel quite demotivated, and your work performance will suffer.

On the other hand, you may be in a position where you carry some authority and, indeed, are able to pass some of it to others. This passing of responsibility is called delegation. You may find that you simply cannot carry out all your duties, but you do have one or two juniors working under you. In this situation it makes sense to ask them to do some of the more routine and onerous jobs. Not only does this make your life easier, but it also makes your juniors' work more interesting.

The question that now arises is: how much of your work do you pass on and to whom? And how important is that work?

Delegating is not always easy, but people who learn to successfully delegate will find their lives much easier.

How you delegate responsibility is extremely important. Nobody wants to be made to feel like a dumping ground, but it is possible to pass on some duties in such a way that the people concerned feel as though they are being given a real opportunity.

Being fair

How you treat your colleagues will show whether or not you are fair. Ideally, you will treat everyone with the same respect, courtesy and understanding. If you are asked a favour by someone, your reaction should be the same whether it is the boss or the junior messenger.

If you treat everyone as you yourself would like to be treated, you will find that you can't go wrong.

Acknowledging success

There will be times when one of your colleagues will be promoted or even just congratulated on a job well done. This is a good opportunity for you also do acknowledge his or her achievement.

If a colleague does something for you, or for the firm, particularly well, don't hesitate to tell them what a great job they have done.

Hard work deserves reward, and this lies in the good feeling that comes from having acknowledged.

Showing your appreciation

When someone goes out of their way to help you, even if it's only by giving you information or by telling you where you can get some information, it is not only polite but essential that you show your appreciation. Apart from having made a good impression, you know that you can always approach that particular person again.

Appreciation can take the form of a simple 'thank you' note, flowers or chocolates. Even a phone call will be appreciated as it shows that you are aware of the value of the help given.

Whatever form the 'thank you' takes, what is important is that you have taken the time to make the gesture.

Performance and productivity

It may seem obvious, but good performance and high productivity are important.

It is also important to remember that the better you perform, the more productive you will be in your job.

Punctuality

Every job has its own set of working hours, which may not be the traditional nine-to-five. You may have to start as early as 07.30 – or you may even be asked to work a night shift.

What is important is that the time stated on your job description is the time at which you start work. Not half-an-hour later, or even five minutes later but punctually at the stated time.

(Of course, nobody minds if you start early). You may think that it won't matter if you arrive a few minutes late, but somebody usually notices and ultimately it will count against you.

A TYPICAL EMPLOYER / EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP

- Respect for the employer. Despite individual personality differences, there should be respect for his/her judgement, integrity and superiority. If this is impossible, find another employer.
- Be willing to help and support the employer. This is done by relieving the employer of all the aspects of his/her job (with his/her consent) that can be handled by you. It allows him/her freedom to do those aspects of the job that he /she is qualified to do. At the same time, you will grow in competence. You can lift part of the load from his/her shoulders and share the workload as an effective team.
- Know the employer's goals and problems. Working together towards the same goals and helping to sort out problems also relates to willingness and co-operation.
- Know the employer, his/her certain personality, management style, methods, likes and dislikes. This helps you to establish a compatible routine, harmony, and teamwork and helps to avoid areas of mutual irritation.
- Be co-operative, gracious and respectful when he/she asks you to do things. If overtime or any other aspect becomes a problem, discuss it.
- Be patient, tactful and good-humoured.
- Exercise good judgement. Know how to prioritise. Remain cool under pressure. Know how to handle interpersonal problems which can be caused by pop-in callers, the unexpected caller, the persistent salesman or the complaining junior, for example. If a difficult situation arises and you don't know what to do ask the employer what he/she wants you to do.
- Be trustworthy. This means being reliable, punctual and meticulous in sticking to rules and regulations. Do not lengthen tea or lunch breaks, and do not leave before the employer does.
- The secretary shares confidential information with his/her employer and must never discuss or reveal any secrets to anyone.
- Handle criticism graciously. Everyone makes mistakes but it is our attitude towards criticism that makes the difference between a good or a bad employee. People who react badly, cause scenes or create a bad atmosphere when corrected, will cause the employer to tolerate a bad situation until it either harms their work relationship or leads to dismissal. A good worker asks the employer to let him/her know if there is a problem anywhere and shows that he is eager to improve.
 - ❖ Welcome constructive criticism, correction and help.
 - ❖ Do not justify our error nor blame anyone else.
 - ❖ Graciously accede the error, apologise and try to avoid repetition.
 - ❖ Admit to errors which have not been uncovered and earn the employer's respect. This way he/she can trust and rely on you. If you admit to an error and correct it yourself, he/she knows that you are able to solve your own problems. If the employer has to correct the situation, then ask him/her immediately to do so. In this way you will work well as a team.

- Do not bring your personal problems to work or discuss intimate details at Work. Unless there is a very good reason for telling the employer (facing a criminal charge), keep your private matters private.
- Do not use the office time for personal phone calls, sorting out personal problems or personal business.

SEXUAL HARRASSMENT

Sexual harassment is an extremely wide subject and, in the workplace, it is a very real problem.

Sexual harassment is the making of deliberate or repeated, uninvited, unreturned and certainly unwelcome advances in a work situation. When it happens to you, it can substantially interfere with your work performance.

Sexual harassment is no laughing matter and must be taken seriously.

It is

- offensive
- objectionable
- causes discomfort or humiliation
- interferes with the recipient's job performance and
- is illegal under our Constitution and the Sex Discrimination Act.

Sexual harassment includes, but is not limited to, the following actions:

- Verbal behaviour (dirty jokes and teasing remarks or questions with sexually implicit overtones.)
- Pressure for sexual favours in exchange for promotion or better jobs at work.
- Any form of attempted rape or rape.
- Threats of job loss unless sexual favours are given;

When any of these happen to you, it is often hard to know just what to do. To whom should you talk or go for help? The main thing is to take action immediately and not allow the situation to continue. Your course of action should include the following steps:

- Find out if your firm has a policy concerning sexual harassment, and what it is.
- Tell the person that you find the behaviour highly offensive and would like it to stop immediately.
- Keep a chronological record of when, how, what and where these incidents take place. If there are any witnesses, you should get statements from them.
- Find someone you can really talk to (a friend, brother or sister). You will need both their support and backup.
- Keep any written documentation that you receive from the offender and, if possible, tape any phone calls.

Find out if anyone else has also been harassed by the offender and see if you can't combine resources and support each other. Don't be afraid that people will think you're the bad one. Rather let them see that you stand up for your rights. You will be respected and admired for this.

Dealing with unwanted advances

The odd dirty joke or light sexual banter is normal in any office and has to be accepted. It is also highly unlikely that you will never hear the odd swear word.

This is all right as long as it is kept at a light level, but if someone starts to be a nuisance or is really offensive, then it's time to take action. Sexual harassment is no respecter of gender – you can be harassed whether you are male or female, and you may even be harassed by people of the same sex as yourself. It might start off with something that seems innocent but can go on to be a real nuisance.

If it doesn't feel right, then it's time to do something about it.

The harassment may start with an invitation for a drink after work. In a group this is fine but be careful when it's only the two of you.

You have the right to refuse if you don't want to go out with a particular person.

The problems start when he or she just won't take 'no' for an answer.

When this happens, you can try one of the following lines:

- 'Thank you, but I'm already involved with someone.'
- 'I think you're really nice, but I make it a policy never to date people I work with.' (Be careful here as this could backfire if you ever do go out with someone from work.)
- 'I'm about to get married soon.'

If the other person is married, you may feel particularly uncomfortable, and a good way to deal with this sort of person is:

'Actually, I've wanted you for ages. Let's phone your wife now and tell her you're leaving her for me.'

If the advances take the form of 'touching' and go on to become 'serious passes', you may have to take more serious action.

However, you can usually see this coming and should be able to head it off before it becomes too serious.

Remember that most people can only take so many negative responses.

ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Our country is characterized by its diverse cultures and its many languages. This diversity inevitably gives rise to problems and challenges which need to be addressed with open minds, healthy attitudes and a keen and honest desire to understand all the people of different races, genders and backgrounds with whom you live, work and play.

While you may not necessarily like every person you meet, you should try to understand them and always treat them with the same respect with which you would like to be treated. It is the right of every person in this country of ours, young and old, regardless of race and gender, to be treated with dignity and respect.

Values

Our values determine what we think is right or wrong, good or bad, important or beautiful. More than any other aspect or element of culture taught us from birth, our values seem to be the main factor that controls our actions. It is, therefore, sometimes difficult to understand and accept the values of other cultures if these are different from our own. Misunderstandings arise when people are unaware of cultural differences, or even the fact that they exist.

Expectations

We tend to judge the way other people behave against the background of what we regard as correct or incorrect, right or wrong. These expectations are founded on our beliefs and the values we attach to certain concepts.

Norms of behaviour

Something that may appear 'normal' in one culture may be seen as 'strange' in another culture.

In Western cultures, the family usually dines together, whereas in African cultures the norm is for the adults to dine separately from the children. As a sign of respect, a Westernised male will rise from his seat when a lady enters the room or leaves the table.

In Western culture it is considered polite to maintain eye-contact when talking to an older person or with a superior, but in African culture, it is considered rude to do so.

People of Western culture are generally more conservative when dealing with their emotions. A pleasant smile and a firm handshake or a friendly pat on the back usually indicate their pleasure at seeing someone again.

African culture, on the other hand, is more people orientated. When someone is genuinely pleased to see you, they greet you with enthusiasm and the handshake is firm and prolonged and you are usually enveloped in a warm and friendly hug.

Conclusion

Needless to say, we should always try to overcome those personal characteristics which may harm multicultural communication and cultivate those that will improve it. In conclusion we can list a number of personal characteristics that may promote multicultural communication:

- Treat all people with respect
- Realise that beliefs, norms and values of other cultural groups may differ from yours.
- Concentrate on the positive characteristics of others.
- Refrain from being prejudiced.
- Avoid the practice of stereotyping.
- Show empathy.
- Never abuse your power of authority.
- Avoid negative thoughts.
- Pay attention to your verbal and non-verbal language.
- Recognise the fact that people from different cultures may belong to the same sub cultural group.