

1.5.3: Interaction in the Workplace

Learning Objectives

- Discuss appropriate ways to behave in a workplace

The first and perhaps most lasting impression you make in the workplace starts with manners: how you carry yourself and how you behave. There are many cultural issues involved in discussing how to behave in the workplace. As with the rest of this course, these lessons are based on US corporate culture. If you are engaging with individuals from different countries or cultures, be sure to study up on their cultural standards. There are extensive resources available online for [information about different cultural standards in business](#).

Attire

At a distance, initial impressions begin with attire. Are you dressed appropriately for this workplace? To “dress up” changes meaning from a Saturday night club to a place of worship to the workplace. Absent a uniform or direct corporate attire policy, look at what your boss and your boss’s boss wear in the workplace. Try to dress like those people as long as it’s appropriate for the job you actually do. However, do not overdo it in a manner that causes you not to fit in. If everyone at your workplace wears slacks and dress shirts, don’t wear a three-piece suit!

One bit of shared wisdom is to dress like the employee you want to be with your next promotion. There are times where you may be asked to attend an event away from the usual workplace. It may even be a bit social (such as taking a customer out for a meal). It is better to ask others about appropriate attire than to show up incorrectly dressed. This skill works in individual situations and particularly well when in a group. Think of your clothing as showing respect to the other person or persons.

Body Language

The second impression you make is with body language. Posture (a form of body language) communicates a lot about you. Are you standing tall with shoulders back, but not stiffly? Did you rise when someone new entered the room? Are your legs or ankles crossed? Is your head up, looking at the other person? If the answers to these questions are “yes,” they identify someone ready to do the work of the day, someone who is confident.

In conversation, you should be attuned to and gently copy the body language of others you are speaking with. If the other person leans in a bit, you should consider doing so as well. If the other person is leaned back against his chair, you may do the same. Avoid copying or aping the other person’s movements, but do subtly follow him or her with similar movements. This is more appropriate if the other person has organizational rank or power.

Proximity, or the space around individuals, is another very culturally tied component of body language. Start by respecting other’s work spaces. Whether your co-worker is in an office or a cubicle, pause to gain permission to enter that space. Once you are in conversation range of another person, no one will produce a measuring tape to determine how close or far to stand from someone else, but there is such a thing as appropriate distance and respecting personal space. Start at a distance where you are comfortable. If you notice the person gently backing up, then you are too close. If the person either moves in, leans in to hear, or repeatedly asks you to repeat yourself, you may be too far away. If the person you are speaking with is seated, try to sit near them so as to be at the same conversational level. If this is not possible, be sure you do not stand so close so that they feel like you are looking down on them. If you are seated and the person you are conversing with is standing, offer them a seat near you or stand to be at their level.

Handshakes

Handshakes are the staple of business and professional greetings. They are another way to get off to a good start—or not. Your reputation may be made in this few second interaction. Reach with your right hand to grasp the other person’s right hand. Grasp firmly but not in a manner to suggest a contest of strength. Shake hands up and down gently three to four times. As you shake, look the other individual in the eye and continue conversation. It is appropriate to make an effort to shake hands with all those in the group or immediate vicinity. With a room of 100, no one will shake hands with everyone, but do greet those close to you or those who may enter that area. If someone is injured or sick, they may opt out of shaking hands. Respect their wishes in this and just offer a friendly, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” If you have a cold, you may choose not to shake hands, but you are then obligated to explain why, for example, “I’d love to shake hands, but I’m getting over a cold, and I wouldn’t want to give it to you.”

Eye Contact

Eye contact is dramatically different among different cultures. Just like the handshake, it is a part of body language that can be handled poorly. “Look at me when I’m talking to you,” is a phrase we may hear from a parent or teacher. It is true that we should look at the other person in a conversation and look in his or her eyes. Your look is directed at the other person’s eyes or the bridge of their nose. In the United States, you should look others in the eyes (top of the nose) without staring intently: glance around occasionally.

Eye contact is important if you are speaking in front of a group and when you are part of an audience. As the speaker, you are trying to engage everyone with your subject. As the audience, you are showing the speaker that you are engaged and value this input. Again, do not stare intently but keep a steady gaze.

Gestures

Gestures are another component of body language. In a business setting, gestures are somewhat contained. Avoid knocking into other people or items that are close to you. Use appropriate gestures to make your point.

Fidgeting is another gesture that may occur subconsciously. Some people tap pencils or snap rubber bands. Whatever your habit, avoid it.

Volume and Location

Volume and location of conversation are important. When you are speaking with others, use a volume that is audible to those individuals and *only* to them. You want to avoid others being forced to hear your conversation when they may be trying to have conversations of their own. Your volume will be adjusted to the situation of the conversation. Avoid cell phones around others as the volume is frequently annoying. If you must use a cell, move to a location with some privacy. Business conversations have a special need for security.

It is never appropriate, no matter what your volume, to discuss company proprietary information outside of a secure work space. If you find yourself needing to whisper, then you are in the wrong place to have that conversation.

However, just being in the office building does not make any conversation fair game. If you run in to your boss on an elevator or in the restroom, you shouldn’t try to enter into a conversation on a business topic. If your interaction with a colleague is coincidental, treat it that way with small talk. If you do have pressing matters to discuss then use that moment to inquire how to find a time to have the full conversation.

Written Communication

Professional written communication is another sign of respect for coworkers that matters to a successful career. While we’ve covered those aspects extensively in this course, this is a reminder not to let your guard down. Always do your best work because it only takes one or two careless emails or memos to leave the impression that that is how you conduct all your work.

Be on Time

Another important impression you make on others involves punctuality. In some cultures, it is appropriate and acceptable to be late to a meeting. This is not true in the United States where we say “time is money.” Persons in position of power may keep subordinates waiting. While you may not appreciate it, you’ll often have to accept a wait for the boss. Should the wait become too long (more than fifteen minutes), it may be appropriate to leave word you need to reschedule and leave. Let your company culture, the importance of the meeting, and consultation with others involved direct how you handle this situation.

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