

5.2.4: Workplace Etiquette

What you'll learn to do: Discuss best practices in workplace etiquette

This module focuses on working in groups and teams. Good manners or etiquette is an underlying theme to starting interaction on the right foot. While some of the things discussed in this section may seem like common knowledge or common sense, it can be helpful to be reminded of basic manners. Additionally, there are several important reminders or lessons about working with others and attending corporate events.

Learning Outcomess

- Discuss appropriate ways to behave in a workplace
- Discuss appropriate and inappropriate conduct at company events

Interaction in the 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 this information.

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.

Practice Question

Tobias has just been offered an internship with a government agency. He was excited for the internship, but he wasn’t sure what his soon-to-be boss Cassie had meant when she said they were “pretty casual” in their office. Which outfit might NOT be a good idea for Tobias’s first day?

- Black jeans with lightweight pullover knit top.
- Brand new jeans and a flannel shirt.
- A pair of Levi’s khaki slacks from last year and a solid covered Polo shirt.
- A pair of pants from a suit and a button-up shirt with a tie.

Answer

Brand new jeans and a flannel shirt

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.

Company Events

Company events can be fun, exciting, and relaxed. Sometimes employees are rewarded with big entertainment privately or at a public venue. Customers are sometime hosted by employees at sporting events. In many situations, alcohol is served; however, remember that these events remain a workplace requirement rather than a personal experience. They deserve the same level of professionalism as your behavior in the work place.

The guidelines below are suggestions, not rigid rules for each event you attend throughout your career. When in doubt, err on the side of greater formality or respect, especially when engaging with customers or people above you in the company hierarchy. Behave in a manner that demonstrates that you are qualified for your current position and for positions well above that rank.

For each company event, make sure you understand the purpose of the event and prepare appropriately.

External Events

Some events include individuals from outside the company. These include sporting events, evenings at the theater, special meals, or other activities. When your company is hosting the event, it is your responsibility to meet and greet others who have been invited. For significant events, companies often assign company members to host specific individuals from the other organization. Employees may need to research their specific guest to recognize them and engage in appropriate conversation. Guests need to be open to meeting many of the hosting company’s employees. Everyone should carry business cards to make an introduction and for use in follow-up conversations to be scheduled later.

Conversation

Conversation at business social events is not exclusively related to business. However, care must be taken not to become overly personal. The social environment helps establish a personal encounter, yet it remains a professional relationship. The employee of a hosting business interacting with a guest should work to share conversational responsibilities, with a slight focus on the guest speaking more than the employee. As with a guest you might host at your home, when your company is the host, you are responsible for the guest’s comfort, which may include stowing coats, pointing out sights and amenities, or leading the conversation with interesting inquiries. As a guest, you should expect to be well-treated, but avoid taking advantage.

Without an assigned agenda, questions such as the following may kick off the conversation or fill in the lulls:

- Have you always lived in [state]?
- What brought you to work for [company]?
- Do you have any trips planned in the near future?

For specific events, such as a theater outing or a sporting event, do a bit of homework ahead of time so that you may demonstrate understanding of the event. “Yes, time trials at the Indy 500 are held for the four proceeding weekends to establish race order.” Or, “this performance is a remake of the 1964 hit of the same name. Back then, Jack Cassidy played the lead and won a Tony.”

If a social event is seated, then be sure to engage equally with those seated to your left, right, and possibly across the table. Lend your attention to the guests rather than your co-workers. You can visit with your co-workers at the office.

Introductions

As each person enters a conversation, introduce the new member to those in the group. Introductions are more than, “Susan, this is Renan. Renan, this is Susan.” Give each person a way to enter the conversation. “Susan, this is Renan. He’s head of west coast sales. Renan, this is Susan, she just joined us after graduating from college in Missouri.” While the hosting organization should take the lead in introductions, that should not hold you back as host or guest.

Perhaps one of the most awkward situations is when you are the one entering an area where everyone already seems engaged with others. It may be tempting to spend time admiring the buffet, bar, or art. Remember, this is a social occasion, so you must be social. Find a likely group, stick out your hand and say, “Hi, I’m Susan from ABCo. May I get your name?” Or, “I don’t seem to know anyone here, can you help me put an end to that?” As long as you look friendly and spend the initial moments of the conversation listening attentively, you should be fine.

If your company is the hosting organization, be sure to look for guests who seem to be standing awkwardly alone and invite them into your conversation group. You are not obligated to this person for the entire event, but offer the person a way to engage. Just as you may grow tired of one person, so might that person of you. Allow the gentle excuse of wanting to greet someone else or refill a drink to release you both from the conversation. If your departure strands the other, then introduce that person to a new group before moving away. These are social events with the intent of establishing more relationships.

rising at the table

It may seem a bit old-fashioned to some, but it remains a sign of respect to rise when someone enters or leaves, particularly in groups that have a slightly older average age.

For example, if you are seated at a table, rise, introduce everyone and then sit back down as the new entrant does. Again, no one has to follow these suggestions as rules, but it is a tradition or custom in the United States.

The Basics

The suggestions that follow are likely well known by all, yet we occasionally overlook them as we become absorbed in our own needs.

- Leave your cell phone in your car or on silent. Do not check your phone for any reason until you are completely alone and out of sight. As either host or guest, the cell phone clues everyone else in that you have your attention elsewhere.
- Do not chew gum.

Table Manners

There are extensive guides online about table manners. This list is a summary of the bigger items that help you make a suitable first impression.

- Put your napkin in your lap once seated. If you are at a hosted event, wait for the host or hostess to place his or her napkin. As you finish the meal, casually fold your napkin and place it on the table. Never place the napkin on a used plate or return it to the table while others are eating.
- Start with dining utensils from the outside of the place setting and work your way in. For example, the smaller salad fork is far to the left. The main dinner fork is to the right of the salad fork. The dessert fork is to the right of the dinner fork or nearest your plate.
- Order items that your company would be willing to pay for or items that seem similar to that of the hosting company. A business dinner is not an opportunity for you to indulge.
- Take your first bite only after everyone is served. If this event is hosted, do not start eating until the host or hostess places his or her fork on his or her plate or takes a bite.
- Pass food to your right. If you are starting this dish, offer it to the left and then take your portion before passing.
- Ask others to pass items to you, rather than reaching in front of anyone.
- Bread is torn, not cut.
- Never speak with food in your mouth. Take small bites so the lull from question to answer is small.
- Focus less on eating and more on the guests. Second servings should be taken only when offered. Your main goal is to develop relationships; enjoy the food but remember where your focus should be.
- Do not feel required to eat food you do not care for. However, you should avoid announcing what you don’t like. Appreciate the effort in your behalf even if you do not appreciate the food item.
- If the event is a cocktail party with appetizers, you may find yourself standing while trying to balance a drink, a plate, and your napkin and utensils while also shaking hands with people you meet. Keep in mind your eating situation when choosing foods, for example, skip the slice of meat you have to cut no matter how delicious it looks. Believe it or not, there are [online resources](#) to help you figure out this balancing act.

Alcohol and Marijuana

It is not unusual to find alcohol being served at social business events. With changes in some states' laws, it is possible that marijuana may soon make an appearance at these events. If you do not normally use either of these, do not feel obligated to use these at a business outing and definitely do not choose a business event to try them for the first time. Gently decline and avoid offering excuses, reasons, or ridicule. You can simply say "No, thank you" or ask for an alternative, such as tea.

If you do want to accept an offer, then do so. However, remember the purpose of this social interaction is to build relationships, not to start a big party. Watch your intake carefully and be sure to limit your intake to less than the host and far, far less than the legal limit.

As the hosting company, you have a certainly amount of liability for any guest indulging at the event. Be alert to employees or guest who may have over-indulged. While it may be a difficult conversation, it is better to keep guest safe than let them leave under the influence. If the event is hosted with an outside provider, perhaps the manager of that concern has a way of dealing with inebriated patrons. Ask for assistance. Never offer to drive anyone else home unless you are completely sober. As a guest or host, it is far wiser to hire third party transportation.

Practice Question

Gretchen walked in to the corporate awards dinner meeting room. There was a bar in each corner, two long tables of appetizers and about 50 people milling about. None of these were from her region. What should Gretchen do?

- Put a smile on her face and move toward someone new to meet
- Get a plate and slowly walk down the appetizers while waiting for familiar face.
- Head out to the hallway and text one of her co-workers.
- Head to the bar for a glass of Chardonnay. It would fill her hands, calm her nerves, and help her look like she had something to do.

Answer

Put a smile on her face and move toward someone new to meet

Internal Events

Some events are for company personnel only or company personnel and a few select individuals with close relationship to the company. Like external events, these may take place at sporting events, the theater, or other outside venues. Even when the company says your are invited as an appreciation for your efforts, that does not mean you should over-indulge in any part of the event. This remains a professional work event. At these events, it is your responsibility to meet and greet the others who have been invited. Try to branch out and engage with people who are not your usual work friends. With really large events, business cards may be handy to have.

Conversation

Conversation at internal events is similar to conversation at external events. It is not exclusively related to business. However, care must be taken not to become overly personal. The social environment helps establish a personal relationship, yet it remains a professional relationship. Own your share of creating interesting conversations and helping them move along. Use similar conversation starters as recommended above.

Engage equally with those you like as well as your less preferred co-workers. You can visit close co-workers at the office.

Introductions

In some large companies, not everyone knows each other. Relish this opportunity to get to know new colleagues. Engage in introductions as discussed above.

Whether internal or external, social events can make us feel alone in a crowd. Look for individuals who appear lost or isolated and invite them into the activities. If you are feeling lost or isolated, find a discussion group to enter.

The Basics

The Basics discussed above apply to internal social engagements equally. One word of caution relates to alcohol and marijuana (when legal). It may be tempting to feel that it is okay to drink a bit more or smoke a bit more since the internal organization is

“family.” It is not right to excessively indulge at any company event. This remains a professional gathering. Your career takes precedence. Additionally, your company may have legal liability for its guests.

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