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Polishing Your People Skills

“I will pay more for the ability to deal with people than for any other ability under the sun,” John D. Rockefeller once said. The legendary industrialist knew his stuff.

People skills are the grease that keeps relationships humming. And the ability to maintain good relationships is the cornerstone of good business.

People skills begin with good manners—manners that transcend white gloves and fish forks and reflect a genuine commitment to making interactions positive, productive, and pleasant. One longtime corporate trainer has seen businesses bleed clients and revenues because of unintended slights, clumsy interactions, and out-and-out rudeness. Within a company, such gaffes can breed hostility, confusion, and inefficiency. That hurts the bottom line and makes office life miserable.

Modern business etiquette isn’t complicated—it’s built on the time-honored values of kindness and common sense. But many people seem to struggle with the basics.

Here are some typical questions:

Ever since our company adopted a casual dress policy, people are wearing all kinds of outfits. In the summer, it gets even looser, with employees sporting shorts, tank tops, and showing lots of bare skin. I’m a little uncomfortable with this kind of dress but don’t want to appear too stuffy. Are there rules for casual dress?

When did appropriate become a euphemism for stuffy? You’re right: What passes for business casual has gotten out of hand, particularly when summer arrives. Bare midriffs, short shorts, and T-shirts are no more appropriate in the office than suits and ties would be on the beach. In fact, many companies are giving their employees remedial dress lessons to rein in the overly casual.

Casual means informal or relaxed. It doesn’t mean sloppy, unkempt, or—worse yet—revealing. That said, you can lighten up when your company permits. Like an actor, ask yourself what your role, stage, and audience will be each day. Will you be taking clients to dinner? Catching up on phone calls behind closed doors? What message do you want to convey to that day’s audience? Your clothes, like it or not, send a message.

You can’t go wrong by emulating the boss: If he’s a suit-and-tie guy all year, follow his lead, no matter what your peers wear. But if he breaks out the khakis and polo shirts come June, feel free to do the same. Whatever the weather, make sure you’re well groomed. Don’t show too much skin, and don’t wear any fabric you can see through.

Gift giving at our office has gotten out of hand. Every time I look up, someone seems to be collecting money for new babies, family funerals, retirements, you name it. I’m no Scrooge, and I appreciate the importance of these occasions, but I can’t afford it, especially for people I barely know! Is there a gracious way to opt out when someone passes the hat?

There’s no shame in being financially prudent. And you are probably voicing what others are feeling. If it’s possible to change the pattern, do so. You might simply tell others about your concerns and suggest a modest contribution limit that is within most people’s budget.

If you can’t change the policy, create your own. Pleasantly and matter-of-factly, say, “I’ve decided to curtail giving at the office. It’s just not an expense that I can budget.” But go the extra mile and write personal notes or cards to those people you know to commemorate their special occasions.

I'll be starting a new job soon and want to put my best foot forward. How do I make sure my nervousness doesn't show through?

Congratulations on your new position! With a positive attitude like yours, you're sure to do well. In fact, a great attitude is your biggest asset on the job. Negative attitudes corrode the work environment. In fact, negative attitudes were the top complaint from executives when my company surveyed them about obstacles to doing business.

The executives' other pet peeves:

- Sloppy message taking and giving someone the runaround
- Making people wait
- Criticizing people publicly
- Disregarding social courtesies for business functions
- Committing errors with names
- Failing to make introductions
- Using vulgar language and wearing inappropriate clothes

Steer clear of these blunders, and you'll do fine.

My new coworkers have been asking me to meet them for happy hour after work. They seem nice, and I wouldn't mind joining them occasionally, but I don't drink alcohol and I dislike being in a drinking crowd. I also feel unsure how to behave on these outings: I never know whether to bring my "business" self or my "social" self. Do you have any advice?

You're wise to ask. Too many people treat these occasions as let-it-all-hang-out sessions with old friends. They end up drinking too much or telling inappropriate jokes. Those are serious mistakes that can haunt you on the job for a long time. On the other hand, you don't want to be overly formal or serious when everyone else is trying to unwind. As you've sensed, this is a hybrid situation: not quite business, not quite pleasure.

The same is true of office parties. The rule of thumb: Put the "office" before the "party." In other words, err on the side of business.

First and foremost, no one ever has to drink alcohol or to apologize for not drinking. If everyone else is ordering alcohol, just say, "I'm not having any wine or beer today, thanks, but please go ahead and enjoy whatever you want." Saying "today" removes any sound of judgment about alcohol consumption. Then cheerfully place your order for bottled water or a soft drink. Let your voice reflect that this is your sincere preference.

No matter what you're drinking, stick to a two-drink limit. Make it one drink of alcohol if you're tired and stressed out. And never drink on an empty stomach.

Stay upbeat, keep your ears open and your manners intact, and enjoy. This is a good opportunity to get to know your new colleagues.

Finally, if you're just not comfortable with bar scenes, why not suggest lunch? There's a natural time limit on it, and you can enjoy the food and lighter conversation without feeling pressured to drink—or subjecting yourself to others who overindulge.

When I write an email, what's the proper salutation for someone I don't know personally?

"Dear Mr. Smith:" is fine. If you've met someone a few times but don't know him or her well enough to write "Dear John," use the full name, as "Dear John Zachary:" You also can put in an email: "Ms. Jones:" (without the "Dear"). If it's someone with a title, you can simply put the name and title: "Dr. Reynolds:" or "Ambassador Jenkins:" Remember, it's better to err on the side of formality than to assume a first-name basis with someone. Let the other person be the one to say, "Please just call me Jane."

Source: Mitchell, M. (Reviewed 2018). Polishing your people skills. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Be a Healthy Role Model for Children

Ten Tips for Setting Good Examples

You are the most important influence on your child. You can do many things to help your children develop healthy eating habits for life. Offering a variety of foods helps children get the nutrients they need from every food group. They will also be more likely to try new foods and to like more foods. When children develop a taste for many types of foods, it's easier to plan family meals. Cook together, eat together, talk together, and make mealtime a family time!

SHOW BY EXAMPLE.

Eat vegetables, fruits, and whole grains with meals or as snacks. Let your child see that you like to munch on raw vegetables.

GO FOOD SHOPPING TOGETHER.

Grocery shopping can teach your child about food and nutrition. Discuss where vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, and protein foods come from. Let your children make healthy choices.

GET CREATIVE IN THE KITCHEN.

Cut food into fun and easy shapes with cookie cutters. Name a food your child helps make. Serve “Janie’s Salad” or “Jackie’s Sweet Potatoes” for dinner. Encourage your child to invent new snacks. Make your own trail mixes from dry whole-grain, low-sugar cereal and dried fruit.

OFFER THE SAME FOODS FOR EVERYONE.

Stop being a “short-order cook” by making different dishes to please children. It’s easier to plan family meals when everyone eats the same foods.

REWARD WITH ATTENTION, NOT FOOD.

Show your love with hugs and kisses. Comfort with hugs and talks. Choose not to offer sweets as rewards. It lets your child think sweets or dessert foods are better than other foods. When meals are not eaten, kids do not need “extras”—such as candy or cookies—as replacement foods.

FOCUS ON EACH OTHER AT THE TABLE.

Talk about fun and happy things at mealtime. Turn off the television. Take phone calls later. Try to make eating meals a stress-free time.

LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD.

If your child says he or she is hungry, offer a small, healthy snack—even if it is not a scheduled time to eat. Offer choices. Ask “Which would you like for dinner: broccoli or cauliflower?” instead of “Do you want broccoli for dinner?”

LIMIT SCREEN TIME.

Allow no more than 2 hours a day of screen time like TV and computer games. Get up and move during commercials to get some physical activity.

ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.

Make physical activity fun for the whole family. Involve your children in the planning. Walk, run, and play with your child—instead of sitting on the sidelines. Set an example by being physically active and using safety gear, like bike helmets.

BE A GOOD FOOD ROLE MODEL.

Try new foods yourself. Describe its taste, texture, and smell. Offer one new food at a time. Serve something your child likes along with the new food. Offer new foods at the beginning of a meal, when your child is very hungry. Avoid lecturing or forcing your child to eat.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). (Updated 2017, March 8). 10 tips nutrition education series: Be a healthy role model for children (DG Tipsheet No. 12). Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>

Care and Connection

Loneliness affects all ages.

Human beings are social creatures. Feeling like you're part of a community helps you thrive, but people sometimes have a hard time making and keeping the relationships that sustain them. Many Americans report feeling lonely for long periods of time. Connections with others are important for your health.

Social isolation and loneliness can both cause problems. "Isolation is about whether other people are physically there or not. Being lonely is about not feeling connected to others. You can feel lonely in a room full of people," explains Dr. Steve Cole, a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, who studies loneliness.

Loneliness not only feels bad, it may also be harmful to your health. People who feel lonely are at higher risk of many diseases. These include heart disease, high blood pressure, and Alzheimer's disease. Loneliness may also increase the risk of death for older adults.

Some of the increased risk of disease may come from changes in behavior. People who feel isolated may not have friends or family encouraging them to eat right, exercise, or see a doctor. New research suggests that loneliness can also directly harm your health.^{1,2}

"Lonely people have differences in their biology that make them more vulnerable to disease," Cole explains. He and colleagues have studied how loneliness affects the immune system, your body's disease-fighting system. They found that loneliness may alter the tendency of cells in the immune system to promote inflammation. Inflammation is necessary to help the body heal from injury. When it goes on too long, however, it may raise the risk of chronic diseases.^{1,2}

People who feel lonely may also have weakened immune cells that have trouble fighting off viruses. "So that leaves lonely people more vulnerable to a variety of infectious diseases," Cole adds.

People often associate loneliness with getting older, but you can feel lonely at any age. A recent survey found that young Americans are more likely to feel lonely than older adults.³ Some research suggests that social media tools and resources are preventing younger people from connecting in real life, Cole says. However, more studies are needed to know whether this is true.

It can be hard for people to talk about loneliness, Cole explains. They may feel like something is wrong with them, even though feeling lonely happens to almost everyone at some point.

NIH-funded researchers are looking into ways to help people break the cycle of loneliness. Studies have shown that feelings of loneliness can be reduced by helping others, Cole says. Caregiving and volunteering to help others may therefore help people to feel less lonely.

Having a sense of purpose in life may be another way to fight the effects of loneliness. Research has found that having a strong sense of mission in life is linked to healthier immune cells. "When you start to pursue a goal that's important to you, you almost always have to cooperate with others to do that," Cole says. "That helps bring people together."

Wise Choices: Getting Involved With Others

Being active in your community and helping others can reduce feelings of loneliness. You can get more involved with others by serving meals or organizing clothing donations for people in need, caring for dogs and cats at an animal shelter, volunteering to run errands for people with disabilities, helping with gardening at a community garden or park, or volunteering at a school, library, museum, or hospital.

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Source: Wein, H. (Ed.). (2018, August). *Care and connection: Loneliness affects all ages*. NIH News in Health. Bethesda, MD: U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). Retrieved November 22, 2018, from <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/>

A Guide to Tipping in the Age of Social Distancing

Because of COVID-19, many restaurants have added food delivery and carryout options. What's more, grocery and food deliveries have spiked. This also means that fewer people are dining in and servers and restaurant staff might not receive as much in the way of tips.

An unfortunate jumble of circumstances in the hospitality industry brought on by the pandemic—limited capacity, many consumers tightening their purse strings due to financial hardship—means that those who rely on tips as part of their overall compensation are being hit hard.

How has social distancing, quarantine, and state-wide lockdowns, where carryout and delivery have now become the norm, changed the etiquette of tipping? We asked some experts to weigh in:

UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF TIPPING DURING COVID

First, know exactly why tipping — and tipping the proper amount — is important, explains Sharon-Frances Moore, an etiquette coach and creator of Shances.

If we're talking about restaurant workers, servers and hosts might be classified under a tipped employee. And depending on which state they live in, if they make over a certain amount in tips each month, they might have a lower minimum wage.

Again, it depends on the state you live in. For instance, in the state of California, you'll receive a minimum wage of \$12 or \$13 no matter how much you rake in from tips. But in Arkansas, if you receive at least \$30 in monthly tips, your minimum wage gets bumped down from \$10 an hour to \$2.63 an hour. At the federal level, the minimum wage for tipped employees is \$7.25 an hour. But hit that \$30 threshold for tips in a month and you're looking at a minimum cash wage of \$2.13.

"In short, employers may and often do pay employees less than standard minimum wage," says Moore. "The thought is that tips will bring the employees take-home pay up to the amount of standard minimum wage. Often worker's tips constitute their ability to make a living wage."

And for those who are delivering groceries or takeout, they're performing frontline work. Instacart drivers earn at least \$5 per a delivery-only batch, and a minimum of \$7 to \$10 for each shop and delivery batch. Tipping can really make a difference with their earnings.

TIP MORE IF YOU CAN

So, how much should you tip?

If you're picking up groceries or are receiving a to-go order from a restaurant, you should tip at least 10%, says Sharon-Frances. If you're picking up a large order or if the driver has to travel a farther distance, consider giving a larger tip.

Bonnie Tsai, the founder and director of the consulting agency Beyond Etiquette, recommends tipping the following amounts:

Restaurants

Dining in: 20-25% of the pre-tax total

Take out: 15-20% of the pre-tax total

Delivery drivers

Delivery drivers: 20% of the bill

Pizza delivery (or deliveries where the bill is generally pretty small): \$5.00 to \$7.00 flat, depending on the size of the order and the difficulty of delivery

CONSIDER TIPPING THOSE WHO DON'T USUALLY GET TIPPED

Traditionally, those who work in service industries — think hotel maids, car valets, hair stylists, restaurant workers, and delivery folks — receive tips. While that hasn't changed by any means, you might also want to go beyond and think about any frontline workers who put themselves in harm's way to receive a tip.

But some of these frontline workers — nurses, grocery store workers, post office workers — may not be allowed to receive monetary tips, explains Moore. If that's the case, then consider getting them a thank-you note with a gift card.

TIP WITHIN YOUR MEANS

Of course, those are just guidelines. By no means should you overextend yourself, points out Tsai. "This extra or more generous tipping may not last if the economy continues to decline and the customers' budgets become tighter."

"It's also important for workers to remember that if a customer gives you a larger tip than usual, do not expect it to become the norm or take it for granted as things will continue to shift during these unprecedented times."

If you would prefer to tip more generously, then consider eating out less, getting delivery less, or batching your grocery orders. When getting food delivered is a special event versus a regular occurrence, you might be able to afford to tip a little more each time.

PRACTICE EMPATHY AND GENEROSITY

During these times when working at a grocery store or post office means risking your health, it's particularly important to practice kindness, empathy, and generosity whenever possible. "These workers may not have earned any income during the quarantine," says Tsai. "As patrons, we should keep in mind that these workers are risking their health and safety in order to provide us a service; therefore if we can tip more if we can do so."

Moore adds that tipping above the standard should be considered as service employee's jobs have become more important and challenging. "Their occupations have become dangerous, as their basic duties place them in a position of increased potential exposure to Covid-19," she says.

"Further, the rise of the number of interactions between workers and highly emotional, volatile and stressed customers has made an already tough job even more difficult. These new dynamics of service jobs should be compensated through tipping at a higher rate." Whether it's through kind words or a thoughtful gesture, give in whatever manner you're able to. It could make a difference in these frontline worker's lives.

Writer: Jackie Lam is an L.A.-based personal finance writer who is passionate about helping creatives with their finances. Her work has appeared in Forbes, Mental Floss, Business Insider, and GOOD. She blogs at heyfreelancer.com.

Source: Lam, Jackie (2020, November 18). A Guide to Tipping in the Age of Social Distancing. Retrieved January 26, 2021, from <https://www.moneymanagement.org/blog/how-much-should-you-tip>