

## The upside of Etiquette

Learning Management companies like ours are often asked to create learning models to teach or enhance personal etiquette of employees. While deep diving into the needs and where they emanate from, I often realize that in many organizations, the most rudimentary of etiquette and manners are missing in people. What is even more disturbing is that there is no real urgency to make such basic things a critical and actionable daily mass. This problem is often exacerbated by the clash of co-workers with different cultural predilections. Most organizations have an ever increasing pool of employees who have travelled, lived or worked abroad. Exposure to an alternative etiquette eco-system takes root in the form of expectations once these travelling employees or individuals return to home base. That's when the problem becomes even more pronounced.

**Talking loudly in common areas or public spaces** is a serious problem in the Indian workspace. Maybe it stems from an inherited cultural paradigm that looks down at privacy. In our large Indian joint families, privacy was largely unknown and when pursued was seen as something that would destroy the collectiveness of the unit. Maybe our inability to prevent ourselves from intruding into others space is a residual effect of our heritage. In sharp contrast, in the US, anyone talking too loudly in a restaurant or theater or even on a train will be frowned upon aggressively by others till he or she capitulates and stops. In fact, many train services carry a "silence zone" car where you will be reprimanded for talking loudly, using your mobile or even listening to an I-pod that may be deemed too loud through headphones by the Ticket Superintendant no less! The other problem in Indian workspaces is the inability of most of us to state clearly and assertively that our professional privacy or our ability to perform is being undermined by our colleagues who are loud. It is extremely important to understand that when you create noise for your co-workers, you are behaving badly. In open offices where there are few partitions, we all must be very conscious of where we can talk, how freely and how loudly we can talk.

**Swearing** in the workplace is another thing that should not be tolerated. In the north of India, there are favorite curse words that men use freely at work. Very often they are unmindful of who is in their hearing radar. I have myself been in situations where male colleagues have let out a volley of expletives, not abusing anyone in particular but simply peppering their conversation with other male co-workers. Swearing is a matter of grave cultural sensitivity. Women react particularly badly to swear words because most have a sexually aggressive connotation or meaning. Swearing just makes people appear uncouth and boorish. No matter how successful you are at work, if your style is to swear and let out volleys of expletives then rest assured that your reputation will walk ahead of you and color opinions without giving you a chance to defend yourself. We all swear occasionally but it should be an exception and not a norm. Offices should have a zero tolerance policy towards swearing.

**Eating at your desks** is another problem which should be seen clearly and around which there should be no compromise. Thankfully, most offices now have a segregated area for dining. In offices that do not have such an arrangement, the administrative wing should designate a particular desk or area of a few desks where everyone can gather and open their tiffins and eat. This should be done by rotation so that all those whose desks are marked for this activity, get relief once their designated week or month is

over. The danger of every one eating at their desk is big. You may inadvertently soil your own clothes or desk or worse still, those items that are company or client property such as files or documents or affidavits or forms. In our lifetimes, all of us have seen at least one such soiled document and I believe I speak for everyone when I say, we hated that sight. Very often people will ask what's wrong with eating at their desk. Surely people in the west do it (which they do) and in the interest of time shouldn't it be seen as time saving? The answer is yes it saves time and yes in the west people may often eat at their desks. But we have to understand that a quick meal at the desk in the west could mean a sandwich and a soda. It rarely means dal, roti, sabji, pickle, dahi and rice all of which are yummy to eat but difficult to manage! These food items do not constitute food on the go. But this is not to say that employers should start demanding changing of eating habits. Everyone just needs to think through how their immediate eco-system at work could get compromised by an innocuous act of eating at their desk. It is potentially un-hygienic and the smell of food can sit in the work area for a long time. Soiled documents hurt the eyes and indicate how little they mean to the person who is their keeper

**Opening the door for women** is not a common practice of Indian men. We live in a brave new world and I for one do not believe in having a gender discourse for the sake of one but there are virtues of opening doors for women, especially your female co-workers. I'm not sure how this originated and there are hundreds of theories, but even if you discount all of them, it makes good sense for a number of reasons to open the door for women and let them enter a room or an elevator first. The most basic and overwhelming reason I can find is that physical privacy is of great importance to women. On many levels and all over the world, women carry an in built wariness when it comes to physical contact with men who are not family. Under these circumstances, to jostle with male colleagues to enter or exit rooms or elevators can cause physical friction which may lead to tension. Offices are full of stories of insinuations against some men folk who have inadvertently jostled with women (some are habitual at this without even realizing what they are doing). Surely, it is wrong to cast aspersions based only on lack of etiquette but sadly, it happens. So, it is better to realize that opening doors for women has now become a social norm all over the world. It is even more important to do this at work. Besides, being called chivalrous and gentlemanly by your female colleagues can only add to your luster and reputation and not detract from it.

**Writing correctly** whether it is writing a memo or emails shows so much about your personal level of etiquette and manners. Some of the things that are highly unpalatable are bold fonts, writing in upper case and using social media influenced abbreviations. We should all remember that even though the internet has made communication easier and faster, we are still writing business communication at work. These are the less formal versions of those highfalutin letters that our grandfathers used to write. The style may have changed but the intent is the same. It is communication with a purpose. It is communication that is integral to your professional responsibilities. It is communication that is formal. No one wants to take an executive who writes 'cud" instead of could seriously. No one appreciates getting an email with bold letters marked in bright colors that reiterate messages through upper case sentences! So correct that style to be taken seriously and do not antagonize people with bold and upper case writing.

**Cutting people off in a conversation** does not score you extra points in a meeting. This is a universal problem with some people. Very often this is a behavior that is displayed by people who have a mind that races fast and who normally are low on patience. But they don't realize that their behavior, no matter how important a point they are raising, becomes a nuisance to all others. People see this behavior as threatening, arrogant and competitive. Wait to get your turn to speak. If you cannot wait, please raise a finger to be heard out of turn. Office meetings follow a protocol. If it is not spelt out, it is understood. It is definitely a breach of protocol to indulge in out of turn speaking and cutting co-workers off. No matter how passionate you are and how relevant your point is, it will always be seen as one-upmanship. So save yourself the trouble and wait.

**Dressing shabbily for work** is dead giveaway when it comes to showing how much respect you have for yourself and your professional environment. We've moved to smart casuals from business attire but that does not give us a pass to turn out poorly at work. I've seen people wear buckled slippers under jeans to work. I've seen women wear tight clothes that leave little to imagination. I've seen T-Shirts over shorts as part of Friday dressing. I've seen women in beach style slippers under tights. I've seen stained clothes, open seams, safety pins holding tears and I could go on and on. Unless your office looks down on any form of formal wear as is known to happen in many young technology companies and startups, please err on the side of formal wear. Wear Jeans on Friday by all means but please don't commit both a fashion and a professional faux pas by wearing rubber chappals under it! All this shows that you have not put in enough thought into getting ready for work. It shows that you don't really care how you look. You may also claim that as long as your work is not suffering, it should not matter how you look. But that only shows that you are not a completely well rounded person. You are willing to ignore one aspect of your professional obligations by claiming that another is a higher priority.

**Body odor and bad breath** is a source of bother to everyone but is like an epidemic in many workspaces. No one wants to smell bad but unbeknownst to them, they do. Body odor is not necessarily a symptom of poor hygiene but rather a symptom of an incomplete hygiene protocol. We live in a country, large swathes of which face sweltering heat for most part of the year. If it is hot, humans will sweat! There should be a self realization that sweat patches look ugly and maybe they smell horrible too. Unless you've decided that you do not smell at all, you may want to invest in a good quality deodorant that is suitable for your skin and your body type. As for bad breath, it may be a cause of a hidden illness, so kindly have it checked by a doctor. Telling someone that they have body odor is a very prickly task. But well executed, it could change someone's life forever.

Values are engrained in us as is our morality and sensitivity. We inherit it through our DNA and nurture. But etiquette can be learnt. We should not hesitate to learn at any stage of our lives. Polishing ourselves to become better and more well rounded is both desirable and makes you more agreeable to all. Etiquette makes you garner respect, admiration and appreciation from society. Their importance should not be trivialized.