

Practicing Business Etiquette

Employees and leaders who practice professional etiquette in the workplace promote the guiding principles of treating each other with consideration and respect.

While office etiquette seems simple, workplace manners can get complicated. A behavior that one employee believes is okay may not be acceptable with coworkers or in certain work environments.

Business manners are about more than being polite; success in the workplace is often determined, at least in part, on an employee's ability to understand and follow expected social behaviors. Office etiquette involves observing a set of rules for getting along with other people in a work environment. Some aspects of business etiquette such as dress code are often written as formal workplace rules. Other rules involving workplace etiquette are unwritten, so employees often have to learn how to "read" their coworkers, their office environment, and their colleagues' behaviors to figure out how to act. This can make things tricky, especially for employees who struggle when it comes to picking up on subtle social cues.

The overriding goal of business etiquette involves interacting with coworkers, leaders, and customers in a courteous and thoughtful manner so that work performance can be maintained. Everyone should be seen as an asset when it comes to working together in a manner that promotes civility and respect. Whether you work in a formal environment or work remotely from your home, it is helpful to review some basic workplace etiquette guidelines that apply across many work settings.

Office Space Etiquette

Think about office space as being both private and communal. Avoid peeking into workstations or popping your head over the top of a cubicle wall. Instead, walk around and make your presence known. Wait for a spoken or nonverbal invitation to speak. Avoid joining conversations you overhear but are not a part of. When it comes to your physical workspace, it is usually okay to add some personal touches. A few family photos or inspirational quotes can make your workspace more inviting.



Avoid accumulating excess photos or personal effects, and avoid distracting, political, or controversial material. Assume that everyone from senior leadership to young children might stop by to see your work area. Would they approve?

Communicating with Technology

Strive to be consciously aware of how your verbal and nonverbal communication comes across when you use technology. Keeping respect and consideration as guiding principles; your use of a cell phone, texting, social media, or emails should result in the strengthening of relationships. Brush up on some simple practices, such as always excusing yourself to take a phone call or respond to a text. This action helps to value the time, attention, and privacy of the people around you. Avoid reading faxes, email, or print materials that are not intended for you. When you are close to a coworker's computer screen, avoid reviewing the material on their computer screen unless you have permission to do so. No matter how busy you are, return phone calls and respond to important emails even if to simply confirm that you have received the contact and indicate when a response might occur. Unless your work requires you to use social media, it is best to avoid using it while at work. Be wary

of posting comments related to work or a business client. Consider isolating your colleagues from your social media friends and followers to protect your privacy and keep you out of the gossip mill.

Dress Etiquette

Employees often confuse their personal style of dress with the organization's cultural style. In general, dress more conservatively than you normally would at home or during non-work hours. Avoid ultra-casual, provocative, or overly formal attire.

Look around: does your outfit blend in with those worn by your coworkers? If not, you might want to ask a successful and trusted colleague or supervisor for feedback about improving your branding of yourself in a manner that compliments the organization's culture.

Noise Etiquette

Refrain from being loud. If you know you tend to have a loud voice, pay special attention to situations in which you might distract coworkers with your voice. Avoid using your speakerphone with your door open. If you listen to music while working or as a stress reduction strategy during breaks, be sure to use a headset or ask colleagues before playing music. Even though your choice in tunes might feel relaxing for you, this same music might interfere with a colleague's ability to get their work done. If you leave your workstation, be sure your cell phone is on silent, so incoming calls don't distract coworkers sitting nearby.

Odor Etiquette

If you can, leave fish or other odorous food at home. If you do bring in a strong-smelling lunch, heat it up and eat it in your office or outside instead of a shared lunchroom. Although you may be accustomed to the aromas of seafood or a spicy dish, others may not be.

The same goes for cologne and perfume; the scent you wear may seem subtle to you but may overwhelm your coworkers' noses. And if you struggle with body odor or smelly feet, develop a plan to reduce the possibility that these odors will impact you and others at work.

Cultural Etiquette

Remember that office cultures can vary even from one site to another, even within the same organization. Social behaviors that are okay in one setting may not be okay in another. If you are traveling outside your usual worksite or geographic area, spend some time learning about the typical workplace cultural practices and business etiquette in that new environment. A mentor in the other work setting can help you learn more: "I'd like to be sure I follow the company protocols and business etiquette at your site; can you share some tips with me? What are some of the differences between the two sites?"

Social Inclusion

Go out of your way to invite people to participate in group celebrations in the workplace. If you honor one person's news such as a promotion or a life event (e.g. an addition to the family or the loss of a family member) be sure to respond in a similar manner when it occurs for other colleagues. Introduce coworkers who don't know each other and be sure to recognize them in the presence of leaders.

If you work with someone who seems to struggle with workplace etiquette, consider finding a way to gently approach the issue. Employees are often blind to behaviors that distract others, and they usually welcome respectful feedback. A thoughtful, well-timed private conversation can resolve the issue. For example, if a coworker intrudes on your workspace, when the time is right, say "John, when you lean over the cubicle wall to talk, I get distracted and I struggle with the accuracy of my work. It would work better for me if we talk when we see each other on break or in the lunchroom. Then I can give our conversation my full attention." Or for the coworker who talks loudly, "I can overhear you when you are on speakerphone. It distracts me and allows me to hear some of your confidential conversations. I'd like to close your door when I notice that you have your call on speaker. Is that okay with you?"

If you have a business etiquette question or concern that you are having difficulty resolving, speak with your supervisor or HR. Carebridge is also available to provide information and guidance to help you develop strategies for interacting courteously in your work setting.