Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Manners and etiquette: How to improve your relations with others

The values of respect and consideration form the basis of good social and professional etiquette and manners. They influence our behavior by fostering better relationships and enhancing our communication skills. Proper manners and etiquette can also go a long way in improving our individual character, leadership and integrity, as well as building our confidence and professionalism in various situations.

These days, business etiquette is genderless, and men and women are peers. The social rules of gallantry such as holding open a door for a woman have shifted and now people are expected to be polite regardless of sex.

Technology and growing professionalism have also created new guidelines for behavior in the work environment. Here are some of these basic rules for manners and etiquette:

Verbal communication. Appreciate your colleagues for who they are. Don't treat people differently because of their position within the company. Work through conflicts by dealing with the situation and don't take it personally. Watch your tone of voice, avoid interrupting and be diplomatic when working out issues with co-workers, family and friends.

Non-verbal communication. In social and business situations, a firm handshake and strong eye contact make a good first impression. Remember that if you look professional and feel confident, you'll inspire confidence in others.

Electronic etiquette. Our modern communication network is complex. E-mails, faxes, conference calls, pagers and cell phones are our communication links with colleagues and loved ones. Be respectful of confidentiality, privacy and personal time when using these options. Remember:

- Keep business correspondence professional.
- Don't send faxes unless the other person is expecting them.
- At the start of a conference call, introduce all participants. Listen and communicate clearly.
- Don’t put anyone on speakerphone unless you receive permission first.
- In both social and professional meetings, turn off your cell phone or let people know in advance that it's on and why.
- Always excuse yourself and leave the room to answer your cell phone calls.

Introductions. When making professional introductions, introduce a lower-ranking person to a higher-ranking person. For example, if you introduce a clerk, John Davis, to a director, Mary Smith, you should say, "Ms. Smith this is John Davis."

Interviewing etiquette. Going for interviews can be nerve-racking.

But you'll be well on your way to clinching the job by following the suggestions below:

- Arrive five minutes early for a scheduled interview.
- Have extra copies of your resumé and a list of references with you.

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- Ensure that your references are aware that they may be contacted.
- Make sure that you dress professionally. Remember, it's better to be overdressed than underdressed.
- Show enthusiasm, and be genuine and positive.
- Take some time to think about your responses to questions.
- End the interview with a firm handshake and thank the interviewers for their time and attention.
- Follow up with a written thank you note.

Daily Politeness

People sometimes get so caught up in getting to work on time, catching a bus or making it home to watch their favorite TV show, that they ignore their better judgement and make manner missteps. Avoid being arrested by the politeness police and follow the advice below:

- Thank people by writing a note or placing a personal phone call rather than e-mailing them.
- Return messages promptly.
- Never ask someone personal questions about health, age, religion, culture, finances or marital status unless they introduce the topic.
- Add a personal handwritten note to a sympathy card, birthday card, etc.
- Respect people's personal space.
- If you use a colleague's workspace, leave it as you found it.
- Be professional at company social functions and behave appropriately (i.e., do not drink too much or gossip).
- Choose polite behavior over evasive, and direct behavior over rude in both professional and social situations.
- Always highlight contributions that co-workers (or friends) made to a work project (or social situation).
- Don't tell offensive jokes that are racist, sexist, homophobic or insensitive to a religion or culture.
- Apologize sincerely if you make a mistake or an error in judgement.
- If you do business with people from other cultures, learn about their religious and cultural practices to avoid unknowingly offending someone.

Whether it's the salesperson in a store, your co-worker or your good friend, remember to treat everyone with courtesy and thoughtfulness. Politeness is contagious, so start sharing it—it will improve both your personal and professional relationships, and go a long way in enhancing your social skills.