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# BOOST YOUR ETIQUETTE IQ

by Mary Lou Jay

If you think that etiquette is something to be reserved for social events like weddings, take another look. Understanding what constitutes good behavior in work situations can help you succeed in your construction career.

"Respect for people and etiquette are critical when dealing with all different aspects of our business," says Kathy Teitel, president and CEO of Hess Mechanical/Comfort Systems USA. "Construction projects involve many different subs working together. You have to use common courtesy and business etiquette to get people to want to work together and work for the common goal. Otherwise, you don't have a prayer of getting a successful project result."

"Etiquette makes you more comfortable in situations where you might be going into an environment that's different from your everyday environment," adds Nancy Mitchell, founder of the Etiquette Advocate. "It's almost like etiquette is a language, and if you know how to speak this language you are immediately on level two when you're building a relationship. You can get on with your agenda and focus on the other person instead of focusing on how uncomfortable

you might be or how you came across in your handshake. You just check all that off because you know you're doing that correctly. It gives you more confidence."

"Etiquette helps you outclass the competition," agrees Pamela Eyring, director of The Protocol School of Washington. "When clients go to a job site where the superintendent gives good eye contact and shakes their hands, the client feels more confident with the company they hired and it strengthens the client-builder relationship."

The etiquette guidelines in this article and the one that will appear in the next issue of "Building Washington" are gleaned from etiquette experts and from construction industry executives who have seen firsthand how people's manners in the workplace can help or hinder their careers.

## **Meetings and Greetings**

"You have five to 10 minutes to make a good first impression. That first impression becomes cemented in someone's mind and you have to work very hard to undo it," observes Mitchell. "So make great eye contact and just look confident."

"You want a firm handshake, showcasing confidence and authority, but you don't want a bone crusher," Eyring cautions. "Pain is not a good thing. Even younger people may have issues like carpal tunnel syndrome or arthritis."

Make a determined effort to remember names. "People love to hear their names and to hear them pronounced correctly," Eyring says. When you're meeting someone, repeat his or her name several times during the course of the conversation and try to relate it to someone or something you know.

When you have to make introductions, remember that rank has its privileges and that the introduction is for the benefit of the most important person (MIP), Mitchell advises. Always treat the outsider—the client, the vendor, or the new person—as the MIP. Think of them as the people who need help in the situation.

Introduce a client (Ms. Smith) to your boss (Mr. Jones) by saying, "Ms. Smith, I'd like to introduce Mr. Jones." Avoid the use of the words "to you" in your introductions because that can reverse the order of importance.

you're evaluating whether the person in front of you is more important than the call coming in. Just say, "I'm going to let that go, and reach down and hit the button to turn it off."

Turn off your cell phone before you go into meetings. If it's absolutely necessary that you keep a phone on—if you're dealing with a family or job site emergency, for example—explain at the start of the meeting that you may have to step out at some point to take a call.

If you have invited someone into your office to talk and a call comes through on your landline phone, just ignore it and let voice mail pick up the message. (If the person has come into your office uninvited you may excuse yourself and answer the phone if you are expecting an important call.)

Leaving a voice mail? "One turnoff for me is when you receive a message from somebody and they leave you their phone number so quickly that you can't even write it down," says Don Owen, president of P&P Contractors, Inc. "People need to put themselves in the other person's shoes when they are corresponding, whether that's through email, face-to-face or telephone."



## Phone and Email Etiquette

Cell phones are everywhere today, and unfortunately, so are discourteous uses of them.

"Do you remember the phone booth?" asks Eyring. "Why did we have those? Privacy! Today, because the cell phone is so mobile, we can pick up the phone anywhere and make a call, but whether we should is another matter."

Cell phone etiquette begins with knowing when it's appropriate to answer a phone. In most cases, when you're already engaged in a conversation, you should ignore a ringing cell phone.

"There's nothing more important than the people you are with," says Mitchell. "So how can a conversation that's coming in be more important than the person who is standing in front of you? You shouldn't even look at the display window, because it's sending the message that

If you're leaving a message, speak slowly and clearly and repeat your phone number twice, especially if you're calling from a cell phone where there's a possibility that your signal has dropped out at a critical moment.

And when you get phone messages, return them promptly.

"We've all been young and starting out making cold calls," says Owen. "It's so nice when a senior exec or an owner calls a new person back and is polite." Even if that person doesn't need the services of the caller, "you want to remember where you once were and help people move along. Be considerate and compassionate."

For emails and letters, Owen advises being as brief as possible and just sticking to the facts. If you're feeling emotional about an issue, let the communication sit for awhile before sending.

"You'll be surprised at how much editing you do when you make this a habit," he says. "Failure to do so has resulted in a few letters I have written over the years that I would sure like to have back. Jim Coleman, a longtime associate and outstanding attorney at Akerman, Senterfitt, Wickwire & Gavin, once told me that people tend to say everything and anything on email and that it's a great source for all kinds of interesting and useful information, all nicely laid out in chronological order.

"Ponder that for a moment and take a good look at what you are recording on a daily basis. Once you click send, it's gone...out there for the whole world to see."

### **Etiquette for the Job Seeker**

Good manners may help you win a job, and poor manners can certainly prevent you from winning an opportunity to work for a company or winning a contract for your company.

"When you walk in for an interview, greet the person professionally by giving them 40 to 60 percent eye contact, shake hands, and wait to be asked to be seated. That's a big one," says Eyring. Maintain good posture in your chair throughout the interview. Don't lean back, or sit too casually.

"Be organized," she continues. "If you're bringing in another resume or letters of credential [or bid documents], have them prepared in a neat, orderly fashion or in a folder. If you're bringing in a day planner or a briefcase, make sure it's clean and in good operable condition. I've seen people come in with zippers broken and rubber bands around their folders."

After you've had a job interview, Eyring recommends following up with a handwritten thank you note. "Because competition is so high today, to outclass the competition you have to distinguish yourself. Today people send emails as thank yous, but do you know how many emails I get each day? People will open a handwritten note and it shows class and professionalism."

### **Developing your Etiquette Skills**

If you're in doubt about the proper etiquette in any situation, there are some general guidelines that you can use to make it through.

First, remember that etiquette is based on showing courtesy to other people. "The Golden Rule of etiquette is to put the needs and the comforts of other people beyond your own," says Mitchell.

Develop your listening skills. "It's critical that people learn to be a good listener," Mitchell continues. "Not only does it

build relationships more quickly, but it shows respect for other people. If you're a good listener, people deal with you better, they like you better and they like you sooner. They feel respected because at that moment you're really concentrating on them, and that makes people feel good."

While etiquette is appropriate for every situation, you should adapt your behavior to the person or environment that you're working in, Mitchell continues. "It's not that you turn your manners on and off but you fine tune your people skills." You have to adapt to different personalities and different situations; the etiquette of the job site may be different than the etiquette of the boardroom.

If you're unsure of how to behave "always lean toward formality," advises Mitchell. It's better to be more formal in your manners or to show up at an event overdressed than to approach an event or a person too casually.

Next issue: The Etiquette of Dining and Networking ■

## Polish Your Manners

Ready for a crash course in etiquette?  
Here are some suggestions:

Both the Etiquette Advocate (<http://www.etiquetteadvocate.com>) and the Protocol School of Washington, ([www.psow.com](http://www.psow.com)) offer courses and seminars on business etiquette.

You may also want to check out these books recommended by these two etiquette experts:

"101 Ways to Say Thank You," by Kelly Browne

"The Power of Handshaking," by Dorothea Johnson

"Emily Post's The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success, Second Edition," by Peggy Post and Peter Post

"New Rules @ Work: 79 Etiquette Tips, Tools, and Techniques to Get Ahead and Stay Ahead," by Barbara Pachter and Ellen Schneid Coleman