

GOOD MANNERS IN THE OFFICE

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Many of us spend a third of our life in an office. It is worth learning office etiquette to make that a positive, career-nurturing environment. Etiquette refers to good manners or proscribed routines of behaviour intended to improve relationships and reduce stress between people. Empathy or 'feeling the feeling of others' is the foundation for etiquette. By being sensitive to the needs of others, you can moderate your behaviour to minimise conflict and create a positive atmosphere. Although the rules of etiquette are not exactly the same in all organisations, master these five basics and you are likely to succeed.

1. You only get one chance to create a great first impression! Convey your good manners right from the start.
 - a) A firm handshake with a dry right hand will help you stand out in the right way. Look at the person whose hand you are shaking directly in the face and smile. But be conscious of what others do. Some offices have a more laid back culture where handshaking is rarely practiced. After a first or second meeting, it is not customary to shake your colleagues' hands on a daily basis. It is better not to hug in the office until you establish whether it is acceptable. You want others to feel welcome around you, not uncomfortable.
 - b) Learn people's names quickly and use them. Speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard without straining, and without food, pens or other objects in your mouth. If you meet over a business-related meal, do not speak with food in your mouth.
 - c) Listen when others talk. Listen with full attention and respond to what they say rather than respond by stating what you have saved ahead in your head. Do not look bored even if you are. It is better to find an excuse to leave than to let your expression or body language communicate terminal boredom! Do not eavesdrop or join conversations where you are clearly not invited.
 - d) Smile often but do not let it linger too long as that may cause confusion as to your intentions or make you look as if you do not know what you are doing. On the other hand, do not flash your smile on and off so briefly that you come across as insincere. The trick is to be friendly and genuine! A smile costs much less than electricity yet makes the world a brighter place.
 - e) Watch your body language. Straighten your posture while standing or sitting. Do not slouch or, conversely, stick out your stomach at an unnatural angle. Do not talk with your hands in your pockets or scratch your head. Folding your hands conveys uneasiness or an unwillingness to engage.

2. Dress for success! How you appear to others conveys more than you think – class, maturity, education, trustworthiness, self-respect and more. Make it count!
 - a) It is important to understand your office's dress code. Take note of how the senior members of staff dress and use that as your inspiration. Most offices favour formal dress – business suits in quiet colours, shirts with collars and ties, and conservative dresses or skirt outfits.
 - b) Cover up more than the essentials. If your clothes are tight, it may be uncomfortable for you to walk or sit in. And too much definition can make it uncomfortable for others to look at you.
 - c) Trends can be fun, but interpret them wisely. Do not dress in them to the office if they are not fit for the office.
 - d) Make sure that you do smell fresh. Nobody is likely to tell you, but if you smell, your colleagues will gossip about it. It may even cost you a promotion as some may think your bad smell implies an inability to take care of yourself. Change socks on a daily basis and ensure they and your shoes are clean and do not stink.
 - e) Carry a handkerchief and use it! Do not blow or wipe your nose on any part of your clothing. Promptly dispose of your tissues in a waste bin, not on the floor or cupboard. Do not display used tissues on your desk.
3. Respect your colleagues, associates and clients. Treat them as you would like to be treated.
 - a) Say please and thank you. Be polite when making requests and remember to thank people. Minding your 'Ps' and 'Ts' costs nothing, conveys mindfulness and hints at a good upbringing.
 - b) Language and tone matters. Take the language cue from the senior staff. Speak to reflect the position you aspire to become. Too casual and people may assume you do not take business seriously. Avoid slang unless that is widely practiced in your office and even then, be careful with whom you chose to use it. Never use rude words in the office and avoid raising your voice even when agitated. Instead count to ten and breathe deeply or take a short time-out.
 - c) Clarify expectations. You are expected to meet expectations if not exceed them. It is difficult to do that if you are unclear about what others want from you. Make sure that you understand what is expected of you by restating it in your own words and seeking confirmation. If you cannot meet a deadline, keep the others informed of your progress and reason for delay.
 - d) Be punctual. Wasting other people's time is disrespectful. Prepare for meetings and follow up afterwards. If you call a meeting, circulate an agenda and try to stick to it. Listen carefully. Take useful notes paying

particular attention to capturing agreed action points arising from the meeting. Circulate the minutes and follow up to completion of agreed tasks.

- e) Respect other people's spaces. Keep your clutter to yourself or get rid of it altogether. Do not disturb or distract others when they are working with unnecessary interruptions. Do not touch others inappropriately. That can be considered sexual harassment which is illegal. Do not tell jokes that imply you endorse misogyny, tribalism, racism, etc.
 - f) Congratulate in public but criticise in private. This will earn you respect and friendship.
4. Social media and telephone manners. Even in a digital age, manners matter!
- a) Just because it is an email or text message does not mean that it should be full of typographical errors, or use slang or strange abbreviations. These convey a sloppy attitude towards your work and/ or disrespect towards the recipient.
 - b) Answer the office phone with a polite greeting. Identify yourself and politely ask what the caller wants. Ask the caller their name. If they wish to speak to someone else, let the caller know you are putting them on hold. Ask to call back if you cannot find the person they want, or cannot immediately attend to their need. Avoid the use of slang throughout the phone exchange.
 - c) Respond to work related emails in reasonable time. Note that most people receive too many emails. Do not send emails just to confirm receipt of emails. Schedule private emails for private time. Be careful not to cause offence or break protocol by pressing 'send to all' when you mean to reply to one or a select few in the recipient list.
 - d) Return business phone calls as soon as possible. Be considerate when using your mobile. Go outside if the conversation is private. Turn off your phone during meetings. Keep conversations as short as possible to minimise disturbance in the office. Pass on messages promptly.
5. Respect the boundaries. Home is home and work is work. And ethics matter.
- a) Although many offices talk about being a family culture, it is important to understand and respect the difference between home and office. Have a life outside the office peopled with relatives and friends. Some facts and emotions that are good to share at home are not appropriate in the office. For example, you may grumble as long as you like about your boss at home but not in the office as it may cost you your job!
 - b) If you cannot fit your work within office hours on a regular basis, you may be sacrificing the quality of your home life too much. If you have children, then it is not fair to them. Adequate time for rest, out-of-office bonding and exercise is important for your overall well-being. And it will make you more productive in the office.

- c) Do not take office pens, notebooks, staplers and other supplies home. It is actually a form of theft. Do not lie about expenses as that is also a form of theft. Catch up with home friends outside office hours. Do not steal time from the office to run private errands. Do not photocopy private stuff, use office computers to write job applications, or go for private interviews on office time.

To learn more about social and business etiquette, or other professional business issues, contact the author: mildred@ttpackages.co.ke

