



ETIQUETTE EROSION

By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.

Has "Thank You" Become Obsolete?

A funeral procession passes by; oncoming cars fail to slow down.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" is played at a sports match; hats are not removed.

An ambulance with lights flashing and sirens blaring, speeding to a hospital, almost collides with a car.

American society continues to witness etiquette erosion. Nowhere is that trend more evident than in business-to-business interactions.

Each day, busy people leave millions of emails unread, thousands of phone calls unreturned, and hundreds of requests for referrals or letters of recommendation ignored. Yet those same people want their emails answered, their phone calls returned, and those golden referrals written.

Some blame social media and technology for such rude behavior. But etiquette erosion began long before technology reared its many heads—and long before the onslaught of social media.

Learning how to stop the disintegration of good manners requires us to consider what the word "etiquette" means. According to *Random House Dictionary*, "etiquette" is French in origin and literally means "ticket"—as in a ticket of passage to a desired location. The word has three definitions:

- 1 Conventional requirements as to social behavior; proprieties of conduct as established in any class
- 2 Prescribed or accepted codes of conduct
- 3 The code of ethical behavior regarding professional practice among the members of a profession

Etiquette requires judgment or discernment regarding the prescribed code of conduct. In our culture, more rules exist regarding the conduct of those engaged in professional sports than of those engaged in daily business interactions, be those exchanges internal or external to the organization.

Additionally, in many cases the behaviors of those in leadership positions within business or government either do not reflect an accepted code of conduct or violate the professional practice code of ethical behavior.

Worse, the media sometimes appears to act selectively in determining poor behaviors, which only leads to more etiquette erosion.

So What Is the Answer?

Mahatma Gandhi answered this question more than 60 years ago when he said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Stopping the etiquette erosion begins with each of us. We must be the change we seek.

Of course, this is difficult: we have limited resources when it comes to time, and we face endless distractions and interruptions each day. Maybe by returning to the meaning of "etiquette" we can create our own TICKET to stop some of this etiquette erosion.

Thanks

Saying “thank you” is still appreciated and welcomed by most people. When we have an attitude of gratitude, our thank yous become truly sincere. This sincerity telegraphs loud and clear, especially when we communicate our appreciation by being totally present to the other person.

Saying “thanks” is not just verbal, one-way-street communication. We can demonstrate thankful social behavior by helping other people.

Likewise, sending a handwritten note is virtually a lost art—yet people still enjoy receiving notes or cards in the mail. A handwritten note creates a much stronger human and interpersonal connection than a quick email.

Interpersonal

Etiquette is truly interpersonal in that our behaviors are observed by others. Our actions, be they physical (in face-to-face business networking

events) or virtual (in interactions via social media), are on stage for the entire world to observe.

How we handle both positive and negative people testifies to our own behaviors and business ethics. For us to be strong in our interpersonal interactions, we must first be strong with regard to our own code of conduct and our own intrapersonal dynamics.

Code of Conduct

Many individuals have their own codes of conduct. Probably the most famous one can be traced back to Moses and the Ten Commandments. For small businesses, this code of conduct has often been translated into what is commonly called a “values statement.”

In a values statement, each business identifies those non-negotiable behaviors that are to be demonstrated from the top down and the bottom up. All members of the organization

are expected to behave according to these rules.

Here’s the disconnect: many times, violations of these codes of conduct are ignored. One of the best examples is the existence of the water-cooler gossip station. Gossiping contributes to etiquette erosion, and yet it continues. This behavior is a great example of etiquette erosion because management fails to stop it—and thereby appears to endorse it.

Kindness

Can anyone be polite without being kind? Kindness is integral to polite behaviors.

When we are kind, we demonstrate that we care about others as well as ourselves. Returning phone calls, answering emails, and giving referrals are kind behaviors. These actions should be delivered without any expectations of returned favors—or, as they say, “quid pro quo.”

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Emotional Intelligence

Possibly no other element is more critical to our etiquette ticket than emotional intelligence. How we respond to the emotions of others (interpersonal) and our own emotions (intrapersonal) is very much a part of our own etiquette behaviors.

Emotional intelligence has been identified as an essential leadership trait.

In May of 2012, the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania published an interview with Google’s Chade-Meng Tan, author of *Search Inside Yourself*. In the interview, Tan focused on the fact that people who possess

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emotional intelligence can resolve conflicts effectively while still being powerful, kind, and trusted leaders.

Trust

People buy from people they know and trust. Good etiquette builds trust. Buyers do not usually trust rude people. Trust is also important within the employer-employee relationships.

When bosses are rude or abusive—when they yell, scream, and talk down to employees—these behaviors erode trust and hence erode etiquette. With all the publicity about hostile work environments, sexual discrimination lawsuits, and so on, one would think that those in leadership and management roles would understand how to treat people.

Unfortunately, given what I hear from my clients and colleagues, this is not the case. Poor leadership behavior is still quite common, especially in small businesses. Such behavior undermines trust.

Research from the Kenexa® High Performance Institute (KHPI) in their WorkTrends report of 2011 suggested the following about trust in the workplace:

- ☞ 28% of employees actively distrust their leadership staff
- ☞ 24% are undecided
- ☞ 48% trust their leadership staff
- ☞ 19% of high performers are considering leaving their companies
- ☞ 50% of those who distrust leadership staff have intentions of leaving their companies

Looking at these statistics, is it any wonder that etiquette has taken a back seat?

Etiquette erosion can be stopped by those in leadership positions who are willing to demonstrate how business professionals must act. This requires calling out those who treat their co-workers, customers, and shareholders poorly.

Gandhi was correct: we must “be the change we want to see in the world.” The first step in being that change is to review or construct your own positive core values statement. Then communicate that statement to your employees and hold them, as well as yourself, accountable. **N**

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