



Just a Little Respect

Each generation has its own take on workplace etiquette

BY LYNNE LANCASTER AND DAVID STILLMAN

Etiquette in the workplace used to revolve around one set of standard behaviors that newcomers would make it their business to learn. Today, though, what used to be reliable rules for behavior seem like shaky guidelines at best.

The problem, explains Perrin Cunningham, co-author of *Business Etiquette for Dummies*, is that there's more than one version of the rules. "The reason the etiquette issue has gotten so out of hand is that every generation brings its own set of rules and behaviors, and nobody knows what's standard anymore," she says.

One etiquette school of thought maintains that the younger generations owe it to the older ones to learn the established rules and play by them. Another says it's the job of the older ones to bend because, well ... times are changing. The simplest solution presumably would be to determine which set of guidelines is the "right" one. But it's not that easy.

Whose rules are best?

Traditionalists (born before 1946) and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) were raised to respect their elders, and that principle has guided them in their careers. For these groups, calling the boss "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Ms." acknowledges status and conveys deserved respect. To Generation Xers (born 1965-1981) and Millennials (born 1982-2000), such formalities seem stilted and unnecessarily hierarchical. How can they collaborate with someone – even when that someone is their boss – if they have to start each sentence with "Mr. So-and-So"? For younger workers, respect isn't necessarily demonstrated through titles. It's earned and shown through mutual respect and other forms of address.

Who's right? Perhaps they both are. There's something to be said for each generation developing distinctive rules. Haven't we learned from the diversity movement that different isn't necessarily bad? If we apply that tenet to office etiquette, we're less likely to offend – and less likely to be offended.

We've found that the biggest etiquette faux pas in the workplace occur in three areas – forms of address, telephone communications, and clothing. Here's a familiar scenario: A Traditionalist manager hosted an expensive retirement dinner for his boss and was appalled when not a single Gen Xer bothered to dress up. Although the office dress code was casual, he assumed that everyone would know enough to dress well for this occasion, if only as a sign of respect for their leader.



Not every etiquette-challenged individual is under 40. The younger generations are *victims* of etiquette mishaps, too. In one case, a marketing team presented a new plan to a Traditionalist

CEO. The youngest member of the team, an Xer, was very excited about the new strategy. But at the meeting, the CEO directed his remarks to the higher-level people in the room and failed to make eye contact with the Xer even once. She felt as though she was unimportant, and by the end of the meeting she'd lost her enthusiasm.

Some new guidelines

Rather than cling to a particular protocol, the best approach seems to be to adopt a big picture strategy in which the primary goal is to be more considerate of others. Managers need to "read" the etiquette rules of each generation to learn what makes others feel comfortable and respected. Here are some ways to develop this sensitivity:

Be flexible. One Boomer manager was tearing her hair out over developing an organization-wide dress code: "The Traditionalist head of our foundation says he can't hire anyone if he or she isn't willing to wear a suit. But the Xer head of our IT department says he can't hire anyone if he or she is *required* to wear a suit. We simply can't set one rigid standard for everyone."

There's a lot to be said for freedom of style. Employees thrive in cultures where they can express themselves. Be flexible, but have the generations agree on baseline expectations. Adopting less rigid standards doesn't mean throwing all standards out the window, and it shows some regard for the Traditionalists in your ranks.

Learn the language. Technology, popular culture, and the media are changing not just the ways we communicate but also the words we use. It's tough to know where language is headed next, which creates fertile ground for generational misunderstandings. A Boomer boss may not consider a Generation Xer's "Hey, man!" a polite greeting. The Millennial who calls his female co-workers "dude" as a sign of camaraderie may draw censure from older managers.

Asking other generations what they mean by certain words and phrases invites communication and can provide insight into their values and attitudes. But beware—there's a huge difference between appreciating another generation's language and adopting it as one's own. A Traditionalist who walks into a room full of Xers handing out high-fives and shouting "What's shakin'?" isn't going to bridge a generation gap.

Give people the benefit of the doubt. A Boomer manager was annoyed when she received an electronic thank you card from an Xer employee after helping her on a difficult project. "I got a card that cost nothing and required no effort to send, after I gave so much!" she exclaimed. "Am I supposed to be flattered?"



The employee had her heart in the right place. She just didn't realize how much her boss valued the handwritten word. Too often, people assume that someone from a different generation is playing by the same etiquette rules, and when a rule is broken, they are offended. Yet many times the other person didn't even know there was a rule.

Walk in their shoes. Respect goes both ways. We can't expect colleagues to value our generation's ideas about etiquette if we don't occasionally tip our hats toward theirs.

Communications and actions tailored for the receiver and not the sender are basic ways to show consideration and respect. When expressing messages of appreciation, today's savvy business owner sends correspondence on letterhead to his traditional clients, handwritten notes to his more casual customers, and e-mails to the techno-savvy types. Good manners aren't so much about trends as they are about thoughtfulness.

Business etiquette today is a mixture of flexible new standards and consideration for other generations' values. When it comes down to it, however, simple gestures such as listening, asking questions, acknowledging what people say, and acting on their suggestions are the best ways to show we value other people's feelings and contributions.



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