



How rude is your office?

Manners experts benefit as firms reset workplace rules

Robert Rodriguez, Fresno Bee
Tuesday, January 1, 2008

If you've ever overheard a co-worker's loud cell phone conversation, noticed underwear peeking from the tops of his or her pants, or become nauseated watching one talk with a mouthful of food, you are not alone. Business etiquette experts say a lack of social graces and general rudeness have become all too common in the workplace. "I have seen some people walk through buffet lines stacking their plate 3 feet high," said Maria Everding, founder of the Etiquette Institute in St. Louis. "Or you see others trying to drink out of a coffee stirrer because they think it's a tiny straw."

The line between what is acceptable and unacceptable is blurring as a new generation of employees enters the work force, bringing with it personal technology -- cell phones and MySpace, for example -- and a more casual attitude and fashion sense.

The boom in bad manners has been good for the etiquette business, whose experts are finding their talents in demand. Businesses are also discovering that polishing their employees' behavior pays off in increased productivity, better sales and a more cooperative workplace.

Everding, who has taught etiquette for more than 20 years, trains and certifies at least 10 consultants a month, up from an average of four just two years ago.

"There is definitely job security for me," Everding said. The trainers are often they're hired to provide one-on-one coaching as well as to help companies become more professional. Advice is given on everything from table manners to how to dress appropriately. The trend doesn't surprise Fresno State University business management professor Julie Olson-Buchanan, who says companies want to re-establish the ground rules for how employees and managers conduct themselves at work, especially the use of technology. Twenty years ago, most people would have frowned at someone carrying on a loud personal conversation while in line at the grocery store. But cell phone conversations go on all the time now, including at work.

"There has been a slow erosion of what is OK and what is not OK, and it is happening with clients, customers and co-workers," Olson-Buchanan said. "It is hard to balance work and personal life, and the use of cell phones allows us to easily slip back and forth all the time."

Generational differences among workers also can create conflict. What may be acceptable to a younger employee, such as text-messaging a friend while at work, may not be acceptable to a baby boomer, Olson-Buchanan said.

Rude and disrespectful treatment also has the potential to bring down morale and reduce productivity.

"When you are treated badly at work, it stays with you and you carry it home," she said.

Disrespectful treatment at work was one of the reasons why Tiffany Smith of Visalia opened her business, Premier Etiquette Training and Consulting, about a year ago. A 15-year veteran of the sales and marketing industry, Smith once worked for a boss who routinely berated employees.

"We were all hard workers and team players, but nothing we could do was good enough," Smith said. "It killed the morale in the office and caused us to run and hide. No one should be treated that way. It was completely inappropriate." Smith used that hard lesson as motivation to help employers and their workers understand how to treat one another with respect. "Etiquette is not just about manners, but it's principles to help people build stronger relationships," said Smith, who trained at the Emily Post Institute. "Relationships are key to our life both on a personal and professional level." Smith said her clients include schools, businesses and individuals, some looking for ways to present themselves more professionally. Simple issues, such as wearing the appropriate clothing, can dictate how a person is perceived by the public and co-workers, she said.

Robin Germain, owner of Fresno-based Academy of Modern Etiquette, said another common business-etiquette mistake is failing to introduce a person's business associates. Germain said you should never assume everyone knows one another in an office. "You never know when that person you introduced could be your next boss," she said.