

Manners Matter

Etiquette consultant Jodi R. R. Smith '90 offers advice for new graduates—and others—on navigating a diverse and modern workplace.

Interview by Sandra Knispel

Graduating from college into a workplace environment can feel like an abrupt transition. If I had one word of etiquette advice, it would be “boundaries.” When you're in college and you're talking to your friends, it's not a big deal. When your friends on the Quad say, “Hey, how was your weekend?” you can say, “Oh my gosh, I went to a party, you can't believe how much I drank.” But when your professional colleagues say, “How was your weekend?” you really have to edit your response. You can say, “I went to a party, and it was fabulous. I had a great time!”


Professional etiquette comes down to the ABCs: attire, behavior, and communication. The first couple of days on the job I'm going to dress up a bit. I'm going to be a little more cautious. If I'm introduced to somebody whose name is Jodi Smith, in college I would have said something like, “Hey, Jodi, how's it going?” In this situation, however, I would say something like, “Oh, Ms. Smith, it's a pleasure to meet you,” and then allow that person to say “No, please call me Jodi.”

The overarching guideline is that it's always better to be more respectful than less. This carries through all of our communications, including electronic. When I'm emailing somebody, especially for the first time, whether inside the company or organization, or outside, I'm going to default to a more formal approach. I'm not going to contact a client and call them Bob. Instead I'm going to say, “Dear Mr. Jones, I'm new at Athlete Corporation. I'd like to

introduce myself. I will be one of your points of contact going forward.” Your default setting should be formal because you can always scale back.

Business meals are essentially a giant game of follow the leader. Once you know who the host is, do what they do. If they order a drink, you should order a drink. If they don't order an appetizer, you shouldn't order one. When you get to the end of the meal and they order a coffee, if you're not a coffee drinker, you can have a cup of tea or a hot chocolate. Order something, but don't order a piece of cake if they aren't ordering dessert. And get through the meal without grossing anybody out: no chewing with your mouth open, or blowing your nose at the table, no picking the black olives out of your salad and putting them on the Siberia of your bread and butter plate.

There are a couple of situations where I'd recommend not following the leader. They concern alcohol and cellphones. Even if your manager and other coworkers are getting tipsy, you should keep your wits about you. Likewise, your manager or others may have their cell phones on—checking our cellphones stimulates the same part of our brain that gets activated when we gamble—but you have to learn to turn your phone off. When you're in a meeting, unless your manager tells you to keep your phone on, your phone should be off. The same goes for a business meal or a reception. The exception is if someone says to you, “Show me a picture of your dog!” Then, you can pull out your cell phone to show the puppy picture.

I often say that having good manners is not about being perfect. Perfect people are terribly boring. Rochester psychology professors Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have greatly affected my work with their self-determination theory. Everything I do is about people. It's about what motivates people internally—internal versus external motivation. It's about what motivates people as individuals and then watching people in groups, how they behave in groups. That realization was really sparked at the University of Rochester, by taking their course. Ultimately, etiquette is about being comfortable with yourself, having confidence that you are doing the right thing, and making other people feel at ease. 

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On evolving manners: “Having good manners is understanding the situation and being able to act appropriately. Mores change. In the olden days, the man asked the woman and paid for the date. But in the world of modern manners, the person asking does the paying. Also, I would never ask somebody in a bathroom what their birth gender was. It's rude. If they are presenting as a female and they are more comfortable in a female bathroom, that's where they should go to the bathroom.”

