

Cross Cultural Cosmos

International Corporate and Business Communication and Behavior

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Are we Civilized?

Ultimately, the basis of living and working in a civilized society is simply being considerate, respectful, and kind to our fellow citizens. Protocol, manners, and etiquette are “methods” used by different cultures to achieve this. Nothing can replace kindness, respect, tolerance, and compassion – and they are our best tools – but, sadly, in today’s competitive world, these qualities are often perceived as weaknesses.

Is it that people are becoming far too self-involved to notice little things like holding a door open for them, to say please or thank you? Are they so busy, in such a hurry that they don’t have time for simplest of courtesies? Is the impersonal e-communication a reason to be indifferent or rude?

It is true that many people consider the intricacies of etiquette unnecessary and overwhelming. It is true that manners and etiquette *were* considered a trait of the privileged class. But that argument is not valid - while etiquette may adapt to the era, good manners are universal and timeless. You may believe that manners and etiquette restrict your freedom of expression. The choice is yours. The type of life you lead and the expectations made of you by yourself, your society, and your work determine to what degree manners and etiquette should be a part of that life.

Professional and social behavior differ greatly in, and within, each region of the world. Cultural sensitivity to their methods of conducting business or socializing can make or break a relationship or a business deal. Even within the same country you will find different traditions, customs, music, dialect, foods, art. How tolerant are we of another culture’s behavior? Is our “code of behavior” more civilized than theirs? By whose standards?

For example: You are visiting a foreign associate in his country. Will you have meetings? Do you arrive early or on time? Who sits where? How will you place your legs (in the Arab culture it is insulting to show the sole of your shoe); How will your business cards be printed? How will you present them? Will you be entertained? At their home or at a restaurant? If it is at their home, should you take a gift? What kind of gift? What should you wear? If he is married, and his wife or family do not appear, should you ask after their well-being – or is that taboo? What kind of subjects should not be discussed? Should you admire their artwork/belongings or will they immediately give it to you as a gift? What behavior is offensive or acceptable?

These same questions will be considered by a foreign visitor coming to our country.

Have you ever found yourself in a difficult situation in which you did not know how to behave or what to say? Human behavior is so unpredictable (theirs and ours) and no two situations are ever identical, so no matter how current you may be on etiquette rules, common sense, sincerity, and courtesy always prevail. Our only goal is to avoid being insulting or offensive.

Why is it that someone’s behavior, actions, words may offend us or confuse us? Because we cannot relate to them, because that person did not meet our standards of behavior. Could they have received a more positive reaction from you if we were all operating by the same standards? Why are they playing their music so loud? Don’t chew with your mouth open. No shoes, no shirt, no service. You have to wear a suit to work. No cell phones to be used during this meeting. Company policies and procedures. These are all practical uses of manners/etiquette enabling us to live and work next to each other productively, however much they may irritate us.

Professional and gender relationships have changed greatly since WWII: opening doors, dining, meetings, cell phones, e-mails (it’s easier to appear rude during non- face-to-face conversations), which is why etiquette may have adapted to an era, but good manners are universal and timeless. Etiquette has often been wielded as a social weapon, however, the adoption of superficial mannerisms in the interests of social advancement rather than a concern for others, is a form of snobbery, lacking in virtue.

The definition of being “civilized” is having a high state of culture and social development; having an advanced or humane culture, society. Throughout history countries have waged war based on religious, economic, political differences. Nations which call themselves civilized have invaded what they consider uncivilized countries. Are we any more civilized today that we were 300, 200, 100, or even 50 years ago? Do you consider our society civilized? Do you consider our business environment civilized?

The power of integrity, dignity, efficiency, and elegance in communication and behavior