

Workplace Etiquette

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about appropriate ways to behave in the workplace, particularly when it comes to collaborating with other team members. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Interaction in the Workplace

The first and perhaps most lasting impression you make in the workplace starts with how you carry yourself and how you behave. There are many cultural issues involved in discussing how to behave in the workplace. Strong **self and social awareness skills** will help you determine which behavior is appropriate and which is not.

As with the rest of this course, these lessons are based on U.S. corporate culture. If you are engaging with individuals from different countries or cultures, be sure to study up on their cultural standards.

1a. Attire

At a distance, initial impressions begin with attire. Are you dressed appropriately for this workplace? To "dress up" changes meaning from a night club, to a place of worship, to the workplace.

Absent a uniform or direct corporate attire policy, look at what your boss and your boss' boss wear in the workplace. Try to dress like those people as long as it's appropriate for the job you actually do. However, do not overdo it in a manner that causes you not to fit in. If everyone at your workplace wears slacks and dress shirts, don't wear a three-piece suit!



HINT

One bit of shared wisdom is to dress like the employee you want to be with your next promotion. There are times where you may be asked to attend an event away from the usual workplace, and it may even be a bit social (such as taking a customer out for a meal). In these situations, it is better to ask others about appropriate attire than to show up incorrectly dressed. This skill works in individual situations and particularly well when in a group. Think of your clothing as showing respect to the other person or people.

1b. Body Language

The second impression you make is with body language. Posture (a form of body language) communicates a lot about you.



Are you standing tall with your shoulders back, but not stiffly? Did you rise when someone new entered the room? Are your legs or ankles crossed? Is your head up, looking at the other person? If the answers to these questions are "yes," they identify someone ready to do the work of the day, someone who is confident.

In conversation, you should be attuned to and gently copy the body language of others you are speaking with. Avoid mirroring or aping the other person's movements, but do subtly follow with similar movements. This is more appropriate if the other person has organizational rank or power.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If the other person leans in a bit, you should consider doing so as well. If the other person is leaned back against their chair, you may do the same.

Proximity, or the space around individuals, is another very culturally-tied component of body language. Start by respecting others' work spaces. Whether your coworker is in an office or a cubicle, pause to gain permission to enter that space.

Once you are in conversation range of another person, no one will produce a measuring tape to determine how close far to stand from someone else, but there is such a thing as appropriate distance and respecting personal space. Begin at a distance where you are comfortable. If you notice the person gently backing up, then you are too close. If the person either moves in, leans in to hear, or repeatedly asks you to repeat yourself, you may be too far away.

If the person you are speaking with is seated, try to sit near them so as to be at the same conversational level. If this is not possible, be sure you do not stand so close that they feel like you are looking down on them. If you are seated and the person you are conversing with is standing, offer them a seat near you or stand to be at their level.

1c. Eye Contact

Eye contact is dramatically different among different cultures. Just like the handshake, it is a part of body language that can be handled poorly.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," is a phrase you may have heard from a parent or teacher, and it is true that we should look at the other person in a conversation. In the U.S., you should look others in the eyes (top of the nose) without staring intently; you should glance around occasionally.

Eye contact is important if you are speaking in front of a group and when you are part of an audience. As the speaker, you are trying to engage everyone with your subject. As the audience, you are showing the speaker that you are engaged and value this input. Again, do not stare intently, but keep a steady gaze.

1d. Gestures

Gestures are another component of body language. In a business setting, gestures are somewhat contained. Many people have gesture-related habits that they may not realize they are doing.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Fidgeting is a common gesture that may occur subconsciously. Some people tap pencils or snap rubber bands.

Whatever your habit, try to avoid it. Instead, use appropriate gestures to make your point.

1e. Volume and Location

Volume and location of conversation are important. When you are speaking with others, use a volume that is

audible to those individuals and only to them. You want to avoid others being forced to hear your conversation when they may be trying to have conversations of their own.

Your volume will be adjusted to the situation of the conversation. Avoid cell phones around others, as the volume is frequently annoying. If you must use a cell, move to a location with some privacy. Business conversations have a special need for security.

It is never appropriate, no matter what your volume, to discuss company proprietary information outside of a secure work space. If you find yourself needing to whisper, then you are in the wrong place to have that conversation.

However, just being in the office building does not make any conversation fair game.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If you run into your boss on an elevator or in the restroom, you shouldn't try to enter into a conversation on a business topic.

If your interaction with a colleague is coincidental, treat it that way with small talk. If you do have pressing matters to discuss, then use that moment to inquire how to find a time to have the full conversation.

1f. Written Communication

Professional written communication is another sign of respect for coworkers that matters to a successful career. While we've covered those aspects extensively in this course, this is a reminder not to let your guard down.

Always do your best work because it only takes one or two careless emails or memos to leave the impression that this is how you conduct all your work.

1g. Punctuality

Another important impression you make on others involves punctuality. In some cultures, it may be appropriate and acceptable to be late to a meeting. This is not true in the U.S. where we say that "time is money."



Productivity: Skill in Action

Edward has an early morning meeting. He knows that if he takes his usual train into work, he may be late. To make sure this does not happen, Edward plans ahead and finds an earlier train. He makes sure he is prepared the night before and sets an early alarm. The next day, he arrives with 30 minutes to spare before the meeting starts.

That said, people in positions of power may keep subordinates waiting. While you may not appreciate it, you'll often have to accept a wait for the boss. Should the wait become too long (more than 15 minutes), it may be appropriate to leave word that you need to reschedule and leave.

Let your company culture, the importance of the meeting, and consultation with others involved direct how you handle this situation.

2. Behavior at Company Events

Company events can be fun, exciting, and relaxed. Sometimes employees are rewarded with big entertainment privately or at a public venue. Customers are sometimes hosted by employees at sporting events.



In many situations, alcohol is served; however, remember that these events remain a workplace requirement rather than a personal experience. They deserve the same level of professionalism as your behavior in the workplace.

The guidelines below are suggestions, not rigid rules for each event you attend throughout your career. When in doubt, err on the side of greater formality or respect, especially when engaging with customers or people above you in the company hierarchy.

Behave in a manner that demonstrates that you are qualified for your current position and for positions well above that rank. For each company event, make sure you understand the purpose of the event and prepare appropriately.

2a. External Events

Some events include individuals from outside the company. These include sporting events, evenings at the theater, special meals, or other activities. When your company is hosting the event, it is your responsibility to meet and greet others who have been invited.

For significant events, companies often assign company members to host specific individuals from the other organization. Employees may need to research their specific guest to recognize them and engage in appropriate conversation.

Guests need to be open to meeting many of the hosting company's employees. Everyone should carry business cards to make an introduction and for use in follow-up conversations to be scheduled later.

2b. Small Talk

Conversation at business social events is not exclusively related to business. However, care must be taken not to become overly personal. The social environment helps establish a personal encounter, yet it remains a professional relationship.

The employee of a hosting business interacting with a guest should work to share conversational responsibilities, with a slight focus on the guest speaking more than the employee. As with a guest you might host at your home, when your company is the host, you are responsible for the guest's comfort, which may include stowing coats, pointing out sights and amenities, or leading the conversation with interesting inquiries. As a guest, you should expect to be well-treated, but avoid taking advantage.

Without an assigned agenda, questions such as the following may kick off the conversation or fill in the lulls:

- Have you always lived in {state}?
- What brought you to work for {company}?
- Do you have any trips planned in the near future?

For specific events, such as a theater outing or a sporting event, do a bit of homework ahead of time so that you may demonstrate understanding of the event.

↪ EXAMPLE "Yes, time trials at the Indy 500 are held for the four proceeding weekends to establish race order." Or, "This performance is a remake of the 1964 hit of the same name. Back then, Jack Cassidy played the lead and won a Tony."

If a social event is seated, then be sure to engage equally with those seated to your left, right, and possibly across the table. Lend your attention to the guests rather than your coworkers. You can visit with your coworkers at the office.

2c. Introductions

As each person enters a conversation, introduce the new member to those in the group. Introductions are more than, "Susan, this is Renan. Renan, this is Susan." Give each person a way to enter the conversation.

↪ EXAMPLE "Susan, this is Renan. He's head of west coast sales. Renan, this is Susan. She just joined us after graduating from college in Missouri."

Perhaps one of the most awkward situations is when you are the one entering an area where everyone already seems engaged with others. It may be tempting to spend time admiring the buffet, bar, or art. Remember, this is a social occasion, so you must be social.

↪ EXAMPLE Find a likely group, stick out your hand, and say, "Hi, I'm Susan from ABC Corp. May I get your name?" Or, "I don't seem to know anyone here— can you help me put an end to that?" As long as you look friendly and spend the initial moments of the conversation listening attentively, you should be fine.

If your company is the hosting organization, be sure to look for guests who seem to be standing awkwardly alone and invite them into your conversation group. You are not obligated to this person for the entire event, but offer the person a way to engage.

Just as you may grow tired of one person, so might that person of you. Allow the gentle excuse of wanting to greet someone else or refill a drink to release you both from the conversation. If your departure strands the other person, then introduce that person to a new group before moving away. These are social events with the intent of establishing more relationships.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about appropriate **interaction in the workplace**. Appropriate behavior is culturally and context dependent, but strong social and self awareness skills will help you to make suitable choices about **attire, body language, eye contact, gestures, volume and location, written communication, and punctuality**. Workplace etiquette also extends to **behavior at company events**, whether **external events** or internal ones. Practicing the rules of **small talk** and **introductions** can help you build relationships and do well at company events.

Best of luck in your learning!

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