

Business Basics

The New Rules Of Business Etiquette

Susan Adams, 10.05.10, 04:00 PM EDT

Unplug your gadgets, respect your colleagues' cubicle boundaries, and do not e-mail at midnight.



A couple of months ago, I was coming from a midday yoga class at the office gym when I ran into my new top boss at the elevator. "How are things?" he asked. Fresh from blissing out in corpse pose, I blurted, "It's August. I'm having trouble focusing."

"I never have that problem," he shot back, frowning. Argh, I said to myself. Couldn't I have said something better than that?

Office etiquette can be tricky in these days of in-house exercising, informal digital communication and open-plan workspaces. For help on figuring out how to behave properly, a new book by Vicky Oliver, a career consultant, offers tips on everything from cubicle conduct to e-mail etiquette. *301 Smart Answers to Tough Business Etiquette Questions* also covers 21st-century table manners (they're not that different from in the olden days) and what to do when seated between two bores at a business dinner (divide your time between them).

One of the biggest changes of 21st-century office life is the ubiquity of gadgets like BlackBerrys and iPods. When it comes to them, Oliver has several don'ts. Despite the fact that everyone else does it, don't listen to your music player in the elevator. "Wearing earplugs is like putting a Do Not Disturb sign on you," she says. It sends a

message to colleagues that you want to be left alone, an unfriendly gesture at best.

Don't check your e-mail messages in the elevator either, she adds. "That's acting like you're in an isolation tank," she points out. Unplugging is not just polite, she adds. "If you want to get ahead, you have to break out of your cocoon." Elevators and hallways are prime spots for friendly, positive interactions with colleagues. Use them.

Oliver also has some contrarian advice about how to navigate open-plan offices and cubicles. Though the architecture of cubicles seems to suggest that workers are available for interruption at all times, most of us like our boundaries, she points out. Don't just barge in, she counsels. Try to announce yourself, either verbally, by saying "Excuse me" or "Knock knock." Do pause before entering. Try to approach from within your colleague's sight line. Also consider calling or e-mailing in advance and asking if you can drop by at an appointed time.

When it comes to communication, be it by phone, text or e-mail, Oliver says many of us need to clean up our etiquette acts. Leaving a voicemail message when you know the recipient isn't there to pick up the phone is bad form, she says: "It's very poor manners. It's a deliberate act of avoidance." The person will know it, too, she adds. If you must leave one, do so shortly before you expect them to be at their desk. "Leave the message five minutes before you imagine them arriving," she suggests. "It sends a weird message when you leave a voicemail late at night."

Speaking of late-night communiqués, Oliver never likes them, even in e-mail. If you get a brainstorm at midnight, go ahead and write that note, but put it in your draft folder and then hit send at 9 a.m.

The same goes for bosses. Oliver says it's bad boss etiquette to harass your employees with notes after hours or on the weekend. If you receive one from the boss on a Saturday, she says, you can safely ignore it for 24 hours. "You are being more than polite by doing that," she says. "You're also carving out a little boundary for yourself."

Oliver is also concerned with excessively casual office attire. If the boss wears jeans, fine, you can too, but it's wise to notch your wardrobe up a degree from super-casual. For instance, if your supervisor wears T-shirts, you should consider adding a blazer and a shirt with a collar. At office retreats or informal offsite office parties, follow the same rule. "Men should not wear Hawaiian shirts and Birkenstocks," she says.

What do you do if, like me, you commit an office etiquette no-no, and say or do the wrong thing at the wrong time? Humor always makes for a good comeback, Oliver advises. I'm still trying to come up with the joke that would have remedied my post-yoga faux pas.