

What happened to good manners in business?

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Ignoring people, being tardy, not giving thanks, cancelling or changing meetings at the last minute, missing deadlines and simply being discourteous. These simple infractions of common courtesy happen more and more, every day in business. People are busy being busy and so something has to give, is the often-quoted justification. But there is an argument that at a time when personal and professional reputation is as fickle as the latest social media update, it could be worth investing some of that precious time in good manners, especially in business.

Let's look at some of the more common ones. Now, while these bad behaviors are often found universally, there are definitely some markets and some organizations where they are much worse than others. It was once said to me that "cultures are defined by the poor behavior tolerated", which means that they must also have particularly poor cultures.

Starting with a very common and annoying behavior. When you request something from another person, and they acquiesce to your request, and you do not acknowledge this with a thank you. If we were dining together and you ask me to pass the salt and I did, would you not thank me? Yet every business day people make requests of others by email and when you respond with what they need, very few people say thank you. This is particularly true in the procurement process. Procurement requests a proposal and yet I find myself having to follow up for any type of acknowledgement that they received it. How easy would it be to reply with a simple thank you to acknowledge the completion of the request?

That leads me to the new most annoying, and that is ignoring people. In fact there is even a colloquial term for this – ghosting – the practice of ceasing all communication and contact without any apparent warning or justification and subsequently ignoring any attempts to reach out or communicate made by said individual. This is particularly hard on salespeople, who work hard to get the proposal to their client, only to never have that client respond again? If you decided to go with another vendor than have the decency to tell them so and why? If you decided not to proceed, thank them and explain why? If you just changed your mind, again, just say than you and explain. Is it so hard?

Next is tardiness. Running late. It is simply a passive / aggressive powerplay so saying to everyone else, I am so busy and so important that you can all sit there and wait for me to get better organized. In meeting driven organizations, tardiness is possibly the main driver of loss of productivity, as people are forced to sit and wait for you to turn up. Do you really believe that you are the only one who is busy? Are you really more important than everyone else in the meeting? In organizations that tolerate this behavior, it become the norm, as people begin to run deliberately late because there is no point being on time. I can recall a Chief Marketing Officer who was always running late. The CMO thought this was a reflection of them being busy and important. The CEO just thought they were hopeless time managers.

Similar to the last, but different is the person who is constantly changing or cancelling meetings at the last minute. Clearly their diary is out of control, and it can take up to four or five reschedules to actually have the meeting, if at all. Sure, occasionally the unexpected happens. But this constant schedule shuffling simply sends a message that either our meeting is not important to you, which is fine – let's just cancel it. Or you have absolutely no control over your time and activities, which smacks of being a pawn rather than a player. It is due to these people there is a roaring trade in personal assistants and virtual assistants whose fulltime job is simply managing an out-of-control diary.

There is a lot of talk these days about the importance of personal integrity. There are also many definitions of integrity as there are people talking about it. My favorite and working version is "to make complete or whole". What does that mean? It means to be my word. For my words and actions to be complete and whole, to be integrity. So, when I make a commitment to do something and I do not do it, I have no integrity in regard to that commitment. When you agree or commit to a deadline, a meeting, an action, by a specific time and date, others will be relying on you to have integrity to deliver. If you do not, it does not work, and the consequence is they are let down and disappointed. The cure to loss of integrity is to re-establish integrity and hold yourself accountable to deliver. That is integrity.

Perhaps I have a high personal standard. One of my mother's favorite sayings was "It is nice to be important, but it is important to be nice". She held a senior leadership role in Guiding and was a better and more effective leader because people appreciated her integrity and acknowledgement. But if being a better and more effective leader is not motivation enough, then perhaps take this advice from an Executive Creative Director I once worked with who often told me "Be kind to everyone on your way up, because you will be seeing them on your way back down".

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