

Avoid These Mistakes

By Mary Mitchell

The Top Ten Business Mistakes

If you don't know what the problems are, you don't have much of a chance of finding the answers. That is why we conducted a survey of business executives to determine their top ten complaints regarding proper office comportment, then compiled and analyzed the results.

As president of The Mitchell Organization, a Philadelphia-based training firm, I have found that communications and relationships are keystones of business and etiquette both, crucial not only to social acceptance, but also to effective, successful action.

Business education has, by and large, overlooked the importance of interpersonal skills. So many professional people were complaining to me, and asking me for advice, that I thought it would be helpful to clarify the nature of the problem.

The top ten complaints about business conduct, as researched by The Mitchell Organization, are:

1. Negative Attitudes

This top complaint had many different names, including: rudeness, impoliteness, taking it out on someone, bitchiness, surliness, ugly moods, bad temperament, unprovoked anger, and unpleasantness.

People forget that words and actions have an effect on others. No one's life is exempt from stress or frustration; they are guaranteed, just like death and taxes.

With a little self-control and consideration, though, the same "nasty" person might find support and sympathy for whatever is upsetting them. By being rude, they are just making things worse for themselves and the people around them. At best, they are further distancing themselves from a solution; at worst, they are jeopardizing their jobs.

2. Sloppy Message Taking

Bosses gripe that they don't get clear, correct or complete messages. Support staff complain that callers talk down to them, and don't want to answer their questions. And callers are unhappy with support staff who are brusque, won't take detailed messages, and are uninformed as to when their boss might be able to call them back.

As drivers have to take a test before they are allowed out on the road, so too it might be wise to teach everyone how to use the telephone properly. Communication is just as important as transportation, and the phone is still the main vehicle of business communication.

Think of all the time that is wasted now on calling back wrong numbers; tracking down and apologizing to people whose names you are not sure of; calling someone for a string of days, only to find out later that they were on vacation. If our phone skills improved, we could be saving millions of hours - and dollars.

3. Making People Wait

In The Mitchell Organization survey, two scenarios were brought up most often. The first: being put on "hold" indefinitely on the telephone, without being asked if you would like to "hold" or told how long it will take your desired party to get to you. The second: when you are kept waiting, in the "dark" for an appointment. This case usually falls into two categories: someone is running late and hasn't had the courtesy to inform you, or you are kept sitting in a reception area ad infinitum without any word as to when your appointment will actually take place.

Making people wait is a manipulative power play. Even though it may not be intentional, it creates resentments and sets a hostile tone to the ensuing conversation.

The simple way around this is for someone to take 30 seconds - it literally takes no longer than that - to give the waiting party an update, and ask them if they would like to continue to wait or reschedule/call back. As with most problems, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In this case, an ounce of courtesy avoids a pound of apologies.

4. Criticizing People In Front Of Others

Giving and taking constructive criticism, even in private, is a difficult skill for people to master, requiring maturity and openness of both parties.

If the intent is to improve a situation or encourage someone to grow, public criticisms are the worst approach to use, serving no purpose except to breed ill will and cutthroat competitiveness. These "Machiavellian manners" will lose favor in this new century, replaced by a concern for personal civility and corporate ethics.

The fact that so many people in the survey spoke out against this type of behavior suggests that the potential for change is timely.

5. Disregard of Social Courtesies For Business Functions

Survey participants objected to the cavalier treatment of business invitations, pointing out that people do not RSVP promptly, if at all, and also assume they can bring uninvited guests.

6. Errors With Names

Errors having to do with names came up in the survey as a big business blunder. One of the participants defined the issue this way: "If a person who is writing to me can't get something as simple as my name and title right, it makes me wonder what else they will be careless about."

Some people also complained about the inappropriate use of first names, assuming familiarity when it is not justified or desired.

7. Vulgar Language

Almost every survey respondent complained about the deterioration of verbal skills, evidenced especially in the use of four-letter words, and the common acceptance of cursing in the workplace.

Respondents also cited poor grammar and slang as problems.

8. Inappropriate Clothing

Every company and industry has a dress code, even though it is rarely in written form. Individual freedom of expression has to be tempered by good judgment.

In this survey, complaints about men were a general "not caring enough about their appearance" - from unpolished shoes, to ill-fitting suits, rumpled shirts, to lint.

The complaints about women fell more into the range of "overdoing it", from putting on too much perfume or make-up, to over-dressing, wearing overly revealing clothing, wearing running shoes in the office, and high heels with toe cleavage!

9. Forgoing Introductions

Support staff complained that bosses often forget to introduce them to colleagues, making them feel insignificant. Other employees complained about this as well, noting the lack of an introduction, whether a peer or superior forgot it, made them feel uncomfortable.

An introduction is another seemingly small thing that makes a big difference in everyone's ease and attitude. Even if you have forgotten a name, it's no excuse not to say so, request the name, and proceed. People don't mind it so much if you forget their name; they do mind it though if you don't acknowledge their existence through a simple introduction.

10. Giving Someone the Run-Around

Surprisingly, this complaint was not directed just at large corporations. It was voiced as "not being able to get an answer from anyone; being referred to ten different people; getting conflicting answers to the same question; people not listening to what I was asking; no one wanting to handle a special request."

Respondents said they realized that the run-around may be unintentional because someone is just not informed, but it was a unanimous preference to be told up front if that were the case.

In an increasingly competitive, global marketplace, the companies that distinguish themselves will place a high priority on personal service. In the short term, employees do have to take the time to help and refer customers to resources; in the long term, this investment of time is rewarded by customer loyalty. This is the problem around all questions of courtesy in the workplace. We get so busy, or so pressured, that we think we can't afford the time to be polite.

Business is beginning to change though - witness the fact that professionals were willing and interested in participating in this survey, and that The Mitchell Organization exists and there is a demand for its services in the corporate marketplace.