

Rudeness in the Workplace |

BY SANDRA FORD WALSTON

“Good morning!” I remember when this was the obvious greeting to start the office day. It may have been followed by a casual inquiry as to how you were doing, whether everyone was well in the family, and so on.

Today, though, I’ve noticed that this pleasant opener has been lost somewhere in a sequencing of such events as booting up the cubical computer, browsing e-mail messages waiting from the night before, searching out that all-important cup of coffee, or checking voice mail. Perhaps the one person who acknowledges your presence yawns in your face and grabs a Kleenex® or a pencil from your desk without asking or even saying “thanks.” The receptionist or fellow peer breezes past you, shooting, “Some guy called 10 minutes ago about an order not being ready. I didn’t get his name, but he said he’d call back sometime.” You’re ready to start your day...and you feel it’s already half over. Where has a little civility gone?

We’ve all come to accept this and more as general workplace routine. Most of us would say it hardly fazes us and really isn’t important. Yet

perhaps we’ve also noticed a lack of work enthusiasm and, even more subtly, an ebbing of loyalty to our company, our coworkers, or even our chosen careers. The “in-it-for-the-long-haul” attitude that some would say “made this country great” is missing. I contend that common courtesy and simple manners, gone the way of one-speed bicycles and black-and-white TVs, could do a lot toward redefining the workplace environment as a place of willing and generous productivity.

Those of us who were raised with manners have gotten lazy. In our laziness, we’ve raised a second generation of individuals who are simply and often sincerely ignorant of such values as respect for others, kindness, generosity, and common decency such as holding the door open for the person following you. These aren’t dated, “old fogy” concepts. They take little to no additional time

or energy, and their returns are great. Yet those who deal in them stand out like sore thumbs...oddities in our homes, our communities, and most certainly in our workplaces.

It’s true that rudeness runs the gamut throughout the day in forms of not remaking the coffee after you’ve taken the last cup to not cleaning up your spot in the lunchroom after eating your sandwich that just happened to have mustard and mayonnaise all over the wrapper to not wiping up your spills in the microwave.

If you start asking people around you about their perception of the acceptance of rudeness in the workplace, they will probably tell you that all of society is a lot ruder than it used to be and that what goes on at work is a reflection of that acceptance. Experts suggest that rudeness reflects a lack of respect for peers or a lack of understanding about acceptable manners in the workplace. It seems that today’s hurried and high-tech business climate has introduced more opportunities than ever for rudeness to prevail. Take e-mail, for example. So many people have sent abusive, inappropriate messages that companies are creating rules and regulations about the use and

Quick Tips

- * Begin to notice your reaction to blatant rudeness, and start setting an example of respectful behavior in your workplace.
- * Begin to set boundaries for yourself; make requests to individuals to “please” respect your business acumen at work.
- * Begin to discuss in your department or organization the professional demeanor that’s expected, and start stamping out those behaviors that aren’t acceptable. You’ll begin to notice how the morale shifts—respectful behavior is catching.
- * Avoidance is *not* the solution! Keep your boundaries—no one deserves to be treated rudely.

appropriateness of e-mail.

What’s the Cause?

As individuals continue to feel debilitated by mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, layoffs, and reengineering, the disregard for each other as human beings continues to deteriorate the emotional fabric of our society. For example, in tough times, the tough managers tend to get tougher. They make employees feel as though they must accept the rude behavior (better known as workplace abuse). Of course, this makes employees feel more insecure and less apt to challenge the rude behavior when they are confronted with it. In addition, with so many people out of work or in transition, most feel uncomfortable challenging the inappropriateness of rudeness (and the bully).

Though not everybody agrees on what rude behavior is in the workplace or what the effect of poor communication skills may have on the outcome, most people agree there are some behaviors that would make everyone’s list of workplace rudeness. Here are a few:

- ◆ Someone acting as though they are the only employee in the office—making demands on everyone’s job.
- ◆ Someone leaving a dribble of

coffee behind so they won’t have to brew the next pot.

- ◆ People checking voice mail or e-mail or having side conversations during a meeting.

- ◆ People leaving their cell phones on during a meeting when there’s no emergency.

- ◆ Coworkers having a loud and raucous discussion while you’re trying to work on your computer.

- ◆ The people who constantly feel it’s their right to pester you anytime they want.

- ◆ Those who treat your Kleenex® box as if it’s public domain.

- ◆ Someone else taking credit for your suggestion or idea.

- ◆ Not saying “thank you,” “please,” or “you’re welcome.”

- ◆ Your boss rolling his or her eyes in a meeting after you’ve made a comment or suggestion, allowing everyone to see.

- ◆ A boss or colleague not deeming it necessary to give compliments, even when someone’s task has been above the call of duty.

- ◆ Not opening the door for someone whose hands are full.

What to Do?

Most workplace rudeness stops short of forbidden behavior, but it’s

still annoying. How can it be stopped? We need to establish a standard of civil conduct by setting an example to enforce good manners. One point is for sure: Avoidance isn’t the solution.

The best approach is always to confront the issue by expressing your concerns in terms of how it affects your work. Most people don’t know they are being rude, so keeping your boundaries is critical when dealing with rude behavior. What I observe as I conduct training programs in both public and private sectors is that most folks need to learn new ways to communicate and interact. Learning to communicate directly with each other without doing permanent damage to the relationship is one of the first steps. For example, a simple and powerful word in linguistics is “request,” such as “I request you replace my Kleenex® box when it’s empty, return my pen when you’re done, etc.” The word “request” doesn’t offend or demand that the other person do something—it leaves the person with a choice about how they want to respond, yet you’ve spoken up.

For someone to be successful, general standards of behaviors and manners are critical. How are yours? ■

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