

Mind your manners

Proper etiquette is good for business

The woman who lives next door to me is smart, charming, chic – and an expert on business etiquette. Her name is Margery Sinclair, and she is called all over the country and worldwide to coach executives through her firm, Good Manners are Good Business.

She provides business etiquette consulting for many organizations, including John Hancock, JP Morgan-Chase, Deloitte and Guaranty Bank.

I was curious about her work, and I think the readers of this column might be, as well, especially with corporate holiday parties on our calendars. So I interviewed her. I learned some things about etiquette – even though I thought my parents had imparted everything on that topic before I left home.

“We don’t know what we don’t know” says Margery.

The first thing I learned is the distinction between “etiquette” and “manners.” Etiquette, Margery explained, represents the rules of etiquette codified, i.e., all the rules governing behavior. Manners are your personal behaviors.

When Margery works with a team of managers or executives, she usually meets them in a private room within a fine-dining restaurant. Beforehand, she has provided them with a one-page “Etiquette Quotient Test.”

By the way, her passion for this field is so evident as she begins talking about it. She just lights up, eyes sparkling, a wealth of knowledge evident. She likes to explain the reason behind each rule of etiquette. Those rules always make sense, make life easier and more comfortable and evolve out of consideration for others.

Good manners are always practical. The only piece that no one has been able to explain logically, is the American custom of switching the fork to the dominant hand after cutting food with a knife and fork. Margery told me some theories of how this came about, but it seems none of these theories has really explained the custom to her satisfaction. She added that, while no one is required to adopt the European custom, anyone may. Margery is widely traveled, and a knowledgeable resource for adapting to cultural differences in etiquette as well.

What is the first and most fundamental rule of etiquette? It’s the Golden Rule.

Are there different rules of etiquette for women and men? Absolutely not, says Margery. Business etiquette is not based on gender. I think many people have struggled with this. Do I open the door for women colleagues? Do I skooch to the back of the elevator and let the women off first? Do we sit “boy-girl-boy-girl” at business dinners?

Actually Margery strongly suggests mixing clients and co-workers at any business dinner, without regard to gender. You don’t want clients all on one side of the table and your co-workers on the other, or it looks confrontational.

What about alcohol at business meals? “One or none” – that is Margery’s advice; a rule that can wipe out a lot of remorse and provide damage control. My husband always pointed out that at business events, no matter how festive, we are still at work.

Can you request a “silent service” for a business meal? Yes indeed, Margery answered. You can ask that servers don’t talk or interrupt your conversation. They

are to assume everything is fine unless the host signals to them.

I asked Margery what is the most important behavior employers look for in a prospective hire. She had a one-word answer: tact. Then she told me a definition of tact gleaned from a 15 year-old girl. “You mean it’s the pleasant side of truth.” Cool.

The number of jobs not offered, jobs lost or promotions withheld because of poor manners – that number is huge. I doubt if any employers reveal that poor manners were the reason for a negative decision. Still, employers want their people to represent them well across the board, in any setting. That is reasonable.

“It is so sad,” says Margery, “that a person is held back because of the lack of social skills.”

In our city, in addition to consulting on business etiquette, Margery provides many classes for children. “We must civilize our young,” she says with a smile.

My adult offspring have expressed gratitude for knowing their way around a dining table. They write thank-you notes and are teaching my grandchildren good manners. That is a gift to our children. Still, I’m sure my kids and I can learn some fine points from Margery. As far as kids go, we know they may be more receptive to listening to someone who isn’t a parent or grandparent.

Margery makes it fun and explains the why behind each rule, and the children respond well to that. To encourage eye contact when meeting an adult, Margery once suggested she would give a child a quarter if he could tell her the eye color of the man he would meet momentarily.

An even better reason for teaching

our colleagues – and our children – good manners, is that they can feel at ease no matter how many forks are staring at them. Knowing the rules doesn't give us license to criticize the manners of others – that is definitely a breach of etiquette! (Parents, teachers and managers are exceptions.) It does, however, give us freedom from anxiety about our behavior and time to be present with friends and colleagues. A valuable gift to ourselves or others.

If you want to reach Margery Sinclair, visit her Web site at www.margerysinclair.com. There, you will see her statement: "People who have a knowledge of manners have a lifelong advantage in job situations and in personal relationships."



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