

Good manners and etiquette- components of businessman's image

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Abstract

Modern management takes particular interest in people, in knowing them from a psychosocial perspective, considering their entire personality. It is based on human-centred systems, solving people's problems, treating humans as subjects not as objects, so that it creates a positive psychosocial environment – the only one which incites, stimulates, mobilizes people for work, inventiveness and creation.

There will always be aspects to learn in a business environment which is continuously evolving. Success does not only depend on the ability to distinguish chances and opportunities, it also relies on leaving behind a personal card which makes a good impression and which strengthens business relations in the long run.

Keywords

businessman's image, manners, behaviour, ethics, common sense.

JEL Codes: D 11, D 12, M 19

Short history

Confucius, the famous Chinese scholar (551 – 479 B.C.), said that virtue represents nothing if not born from courtesy, namely from the heart. The human being would have a natural and agreeable behaviour, a civilised conduct, only by respecting some rules which have been entailed and codified along the centuries.

Confucius implemented, by means of his writings, conduct “laws”, with special reference to speaking and eating.

In France, king Louis XIV established very strict conduct rules although we know that, despite the restrictions imposed by him, he did not use any cutlery but preferred to eat using his hands!

The neighbouring Italians were no less inferior: bourgeois Giovanni della Casa is noteworthy for his work “Galateo, on Conduct”, the term “galateo” being used even nowadays as a synonym of etiquette.

Later on, in the XVIth century, the term “gentleman” appeared, being first used by Baldasare Castiglione in his book “The Gallant”, and it was not essentially modified until WWI.

In Great Britain, the arbiter of etiquette was John Debrett who wrote numerous guides concerning manners two centuries ago. There is also a publishing house bearing his name (“Debrett's”), which currently publishes the most famous books in this domain.

In Germany, there is an unofficial code named Knigge, based on Adolph Freiherr Knigge's book “On Human Relations”. Even if the document dates back from the XVIIIth century, it is respected even nowadays, being used ad literam in the high circles of the society.

Over the ocean, in the USA, history reminds us of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington who wrote behaviour codes for gentlemen.

Hence, modern manners were established in the American etiquette system by means of George Washington's (1732-1799) Civic Rules, but the most successful popularisation of manners was undertaken by Emily Post, in 1922, in her work "Etiquette – in Society, Business, Politics, and at Home". The book became a bestseller and paved the road for its successors trying to promote good manners.

The good manners' code is composed of a multitude of laws, in fact conventions, all having a common denominator: that of not disturbing or importuning your fellow being but, on the contrary, making him/her feel comfortable in your company. Paradoxically, this is the fundamental principle on the basis of which the modern and open societies in our days were built: "My freedom ends where the other's freedom begins", as the philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote some 150 years ago.

Rules and principles regarding business etiquette

Good manners were not arbitrarily incorporated in some social norms. They have roots in a deep sentiment, in that harmony between behaviour and ethics, between the beauty of human character and its morality.

The code of good manners in business includes regulations for every situation and stage in the relationship with a business partner.

The world of business is governed by written and unwritten laws. The written laws refer to a series of information, such as: regulations concerning internal policy, information found in books, magazines, on the Internet, various studies, etc. The unwritten rules raise certain problems because there are rare cases when academic studies instruct students how to speak in public, how to maintain audience's interest, what attitude should be shown at business meetings or negotiations, what apparel must be worn in different situations, how to offer a business card, etc.

Before talking to a person, one sees his/her look, the clothes, the way in which he/she holds hands, or how straight he/she stands. Although we do not always admit it, in our relationships we commonly act according to our first impression.

A short survey shows that there are always tens of details to be taken into consideration, as well as a bundle of unpredictable situations.

According to George Grisham and Sandra Lee¹, there are a few principles which can be considered fundamental regarding business etiquette.

These are:

1. Politeness. According to the authors, this is necessary in every place and at every moment in business contexts. Some of the first phrases of the book are: "we like to be treated politely when we are in the position of clients, why shouldn't we be equally polite when we receive clients?"

Philosopher Bacon believed that "Politeness is the garment of the spirit. It should serve us as our daily garments do: they should not be too well-chosen, but they should also nicely hide the imperfections of our body; anyway, it should not hinder our spirit from behaving freely."

2. Discretion. Concerning this aspect, the authors state that the "appearance of the e-mail and of the Internet has dramatically increased the necessity to respect this principle". Making reference to some rules for using the Internet and the E-mail, the authors assert the following: "nobody can guarantee the confidentiality of the message".

Among the qualities of a businessman, we observe his discretion and confidentiality regarding a series of information items.

Confidentiality represents the quality of preserving the secrecy of information, so that it can be only used by authorized persons.

¹ "*Manipularea în afaceri*", George Grisham and Sandra Lee, Editura Antet, translated by Vasile Negura, 2003, pag. 86

3. *Affability in relations with business partners.* This aspect results from the following statement: “in general, it costs you nothing if you are friendly with your clients or with your other colleagues”.

When we meet an amiable and sociable person we are prone to attribute some other positive features to him/her, such as intelligence, enterprising spirit, or earnestness.

4. *Punctuality.* Possibly exaggerating so as to impress their readers, the authors say that punctuality is “even the quintessence of business success”. But there comes up the question: what can be said then of the cultures where time is not that important?

Punctuality is a part of every person’s card, it is as important as many other things which define and characterise it. To be punctual signifies to start collaboration or partnership successfully, or it can even constitute the success of a negotiation. Punctuality means politeness, respect, common sense and maybe even those 7 basic years of education at home. Being late at meetings could eventually mean failure in business, failure in avowing yourself, the ruination of relationships with the others, lack of competence and seriousness. In some cases, it can be the first impression a businessman creates about his/her partner.

5. *Look.* One opinion I agree with refers to the fact that “a neat look always helps, together with politeness, affability and language used”.

The American specialist in nonverbal communication, professor Mehrabian, showed that one’s look (height, weight, colours, clothing, haircut, accessories and, in the case of women, make-up and jewellery) represents 55% of the impression anyone can make regarding a businessman. The next 38% derive from the way in which he presents himself: body language, visual contacts, trust, etc. The rest up to 100%, namely 7%, is represented by what that person knows or says in any given situation. We must mention that those 93 percents will never supplant one’s lack of knowledge, acting unprofessionally, and they will never hide ignorance. They help businessmen in establishing an easier communication mode with their partners.

6. *Adequate language.* George Grisham and Sandra Lee consider that “this is extremely important and helps you make the best possible impression”. The term “adequate” applies to the entire conduct of a person when it comes to meetings.

At a business meeting, people communicate all the time. Each of them expresses nonverbally what he/she feels during that meeting. By means of nonverbal signs it can be observed whether the subjects discussed are interesting, or if the audience agrees to what the speaker says or not. It is generally considered that those who speak have the leading influence on the course of the meeting or on the decisions to be taken.

The way in which one communicates with the others verbally, in writing, or by gestures can strengthen or ruin a personal career, a company, negotiations with partners, relationships with subordinates or leaders, clients or the public. During the discussion, the language is important, and so is what is said - the message transmitted. A well-mannered talk always contains politeness markers – “please”, “thank you”.

Most of the Romanian businessmen are acquainted with these simple examples of civilised conduct. Still, there are some cultural differences when the business partner is a foreigner. For instance, what is impolite in Japan can be accepted as polite in Latin America. Conduct rules are not widespread at the level of the entire world, but they often find common roots, no matter the nationality. Just as it happened with culture, these rules have evolved and diversified, especially in multiethnic societies. Therefore, they are not necessarily universal. It is recommended that the businessman should take into account the particularities, rituals and customs of every nation. Local habits predominate; they are almost “sacred” and cannot be neglected or broken knowingly if the person wants the guaranteed success of his business. The formula of good manners can be expressed mathematically as follows:

Good manners = 1/3 rational thinking + 1/3 common sense + 1/3 affability

English dictionaries define the term “common sense” as some reasoning acquired by experience rather than by study; American dictionaries define it as solid but unsophisticated reasoning. Common sense, though elementary and unrefined, cannot be neutral. It derives from experience, and experience is connected with culture.

The most important principle of business conduct refers to the careful analysis of the other business partners’ interests and feelings. In other words, greater concern must be shown to everything that is done or said regarding the business partner. Nobody likes flatterers who are always praising their colleagues or business partners.

Etiquette in business

Just as commercial products are identified according to a label – especially nowadays when image and brand are so much taken into consideration -, people also advertise themselves.

There is the temptation to state that etiquette or good conduct pertains to the high society, but it is not true, as it is not an emblem of royal houses or intellectual elites. Sometimes, people connect it with the Victorian age when the society paid high respect to behavioural codes. Back then, all those who did not respect these codes were excluded from high circles but, in time, such demands went astray. Etiquette or the symbol of pleasant conduct can nowadays seem an old-fashioned idea, but it still exists.

The etymology of the term “etiquette”, as it is known worldwide, has an interdiction at its roots. According to Wikipedia electronic dictionary, the etiquette represents “a code which influences social behaviour, according to conventional norms in a society, social class or group”.

Regularly, the rules of etiquette are unwritten, and they actually reflect a fundamental ethic code or, on the contrary, it can only be some fashion/trend.

In its evolution, etiquette entered various social areas: the military, the priestly areas, the royal one, sports, or entrepreneurship and business management.

Etiquette in business is a habit which shapes itself in time. Contrary to common belief, it is sometimes absent even at the highest levels and in countries with a solid corporatist tradition. Etiquette refers to the requirement that the moral standards of a businessman should be in accordance with his behaviour. It regulates external forms of behaviour imposing some model of conduct to the human being.

The image of the businessman nowadays is given by his behaviour in society or among his business partners. He must comply with a series of golden rules in the business world, which are enfolded in a significant word: “IMPACT”.

Each capital letter of the word represents a guideline for a businessman’s conduct²:

- I**ntegrity- to act honestly and sincerely.
- M**anners - he should never be selfish, bad-mannered and disordered.
- P**ersonality- he should communicate values, attitudes and options.
- A**pparel/ **L**ook . - he should always present himself in the best light.
- C**onsideration ...- he should analyse himself from the other’s perspective.
- T**act ... - he should think well before speaking.

A businessman’s integrity refers to the fact that he must always be an honest, sincere and trustworthy person. The reputation of being incorruptible is difficult to earn and easy to break. Integrity is tested when a person or the company the businessperson represents is provoked or tempted to act less honestly. A precious rule in business conduct says that integrity should be beyond any doubt, for its absence could by no means be hidden.

Manners represent those patterns of conduct which indicate to a businessperson if he/she can rely on a partner, if he/she will act correctly and objectively in the undertaken business. If one acts or speaks in a racist way, if lack of loyalty towards the company or the colleagues is

² Robinson D. “Eticheta în afaceri”, București, Rentrop and Straton, 1999, pag. 93

shown, then these manners will be considered unacceptable. Good manners also mean acting efficiently so as to make the other feel comfortable in the partnership.

The personality of the businessman contributes to the image of the business he represents and it is influenced by: loyalty, effortless speech, persuasion, charm and reputation. At the same time, one's behaviour offers the best chance to measure his/her qualities.

The apparel or the look of the businessperson should not always be seen as a potent quality of that person, but it should not be seen as a weak mark, either.

A good impression in front of the business partners is formed and maintained if he/she:

- is physically neat;
- wears adequate clothes;
- adopts a suitable posture in various situations;
- uses appropriate greeting formulas.

Consideration towards the other partners is the basic principle which underlines all the good manners in business. The businessperson should be informed about his prospective business partner. Similarly, he/she must imagine in advance a possible reaction of the person he is due to meet, whom he/she must write or phone.

Tact is the last, but not least, golden rule any businessperson must respect, as it helps him/her approach various problems he might confront.

To be tactful does not only imply transforming some unpleasant situations into others which could be more acceptable. It implies the careful analysis of the others' interests and only after that can one choose the most suitable form of expression. What should be understood from this golden rule is that when doubts occur, nothing should be said!

The Europeans pay attention even nowadays to respecting the right conduct, but in America etiquette is considered by some a barrier, a useless restriction to one's freedom of speech. Others respect it, and the proofs are the posters hung at the entrance in some American restaurants: "No shoes, no shirt, no service", meaning that access is only granted if you are adequately dressed up.

All the cultures on Earth guide themselves after some rules, and the one breaking them is admonished and excluded from the polite circles. This circle was defined by Emily Post, known as the "etiquette diva", as being the "high society". "The high society is not limited to a certain space or group, but it defines an unlimited category of people, spread all over the world, whose members possess a high level of culture and civilisation, and not only do they have good manners, but they also display a certain style", Emily Post writes in her book simply entitled "Etiquette".

Manners should be deeply rooted and should take account of *who* you are, not how you are. Once you possess them, they become "a matter of instinct rather than conscious compliance", Emily Post adds.

Etiquette highlights a series of *advantages* offered to businesspersons:

Concerning the internal part of the organization:

- it establishes harmonious relations between people;
- it boosts staff morale;
- it contributes to increasing the productivity and efficiency of work groups;

Regarding its outer facets:

- it brings a good impression from clients and suppliers;
- it creates a favourable image for the firm;
- it leads to enhanced reputation for the firm;
- it attracts business partners;
- it facilitates successful new businesses;
- it facilitates personal success and company success.

There is etiquette in everything we perform, whether we walk on the street or we send an e-mail. Every day, we only demonstrate who we are in relation with the surrounding world. The respect paid to the others is equivalent to that paid to ourselves. While good manners will never perish, their definition changes from a period to another.

Conclusions

This subject has been of concern for writers and philosophers all over the world since earliest times. The evolved societies of the past millennia had different codes to guide their lives, starting with the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans.

Good manners are essential for one's conduct and when creating a favourable image of oneself.

At the same time, etiquette in business can be one point extra when looking for success.

Over the last ten years, the business environment in Romania has evolved greatly as related to professional image, and this made businesspeople more attentive in public activities or during some business meetings. This owes to the fact that personal image is as important as the image of the business they represent. As a result, they have started thinking of success not only as the outcome of their and their employees' work, but also focusing on building a personal and institutional image which is as favourable as possible.

The success of some business depends, to a great extent, on the good manners and etiquette adopted by the businessperson. Lately, we could observe the connection between the businesspersons' conduct and the company's productivity, efficiency and profits.

Inadequate conduct, lacking conscientiousness and attention, no matter if it is caused by negligence, carelessness or ignorance, could cost the manager his promotion or even his job, and it could cost the company its market and its profit.

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