

The Etiquette Edge: The Unspoken Rules for Business Success

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According to the author, etiquette serves a utilitarian purpose: “Failing to recognize how one can seize a competitive advantage by leveraging good manners and courtesy in the workplace can undermine our good efforts on the job.” Langford is a corporate consultant who teaches managerial communication. Her book outlines ways in which etiquette can help employees to gain favorable notice and enhance their credibility.

Targeted toward those who work in office environments but useful for almost anyone, this concise book covers an amazing amount of territory. That territory, however, is not necessarily that of other etiquette books. For example, only two paragraphs are devoted to table manners and which fork to use for what. The author instead includes such topics as avoiding cell phone abuse, effective use of e-mail, and how to share the ubiquitous cubicle successfully. For the latter, she suggests avoiding smelly foods for lunch, staying home when sick, and keeping private conversations unobtrusive.

Langford does not provide many personal examples, but one she uses is extremely effective. In her chapter about how to deal with life’s tragedies, she relates how her nineteen-year-old daughter was killed while participating in a college walk-a-thon. “During the next few awful days, I learned a great deal about how important human support can be,” she says. Out of the responses of others, she has drawn up a list of six do’s and don’ts to remember when dealing with another’s grief.

The book begins with a quiz to allow readers to assess their “courtesy quotient.” The author divides the book into three parts that cover everyday courtesy, behavior at work, and sensitive issues such as apologies. In that chapter, she contends that overuse of the words “I’m sorry” can reflect negatively on one’s competence.

Although the book doesn’t include an index, each of the thirty chapters is brief and followed by a summary of key points and space for a do-it-yourself action plan. Readers can select the chapter on whichever aspect of behavior is of interest.

Langford has distilled considerable research and hits the high points but doesn’t delve deeply into any of the topics covered. She provides a long list of reference sources broken down chapter by chapter for readers who want more depth on a particular topic.

Getting ahead in business is not easy. Employees must upgrade not only their technical skills but also their “soft skills” to keep from tumbling off the corporate ladder. Good manners can’t hurt.

FRANCES O. THOMAS (June 8, 2006)

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