

1.11 Etiquette for Better Communication

Aim

- To teach good manners and grooming - an essential part of being a good communicator.

Materials Required

- Pen and Paper

Input

- When asked “What is the definition of etiquette?” Naomi Polson, who received her etiquette certificate in Washington DC and is the Founding Director of The Etiquette Company, replies, “Etiquette has to do with good manners. It’s not so much our own good manners, but making other people feel comfortable by the way we behave. So it’s more or less thinking of others and how others perceive us, so that everyone knows the rules for doing things and everyone is in a very comfortable position in society.” Indeed, many experts say that etiquette is simply showing respect for others and yourself at the same time. So, even though aspects of good manners do vary from place to place and some rules may be added to keep up with technology or lifestyles, the foundation of etiquette, its meaning, is still the same.
- We all recognise good breeding when we see it - whether in a well-trained pet or a well brought up child. Similarly, social skills or good manners are not inherited; they are learnt even though they may seem too natural to be acquired.
- In traditional African society, manners are ingrained into children from early childhood and children grow up practicing these habits which soon become second nature. It’s the same principle that we need to apply in modern society as we bring up our children. Indeed, society today should be sensitised on etiquette or good manners as we’d like to call it. It is sad that in Africa, etiquette is rarely taught in schools. A skill so important for getting along with people in society should be given priority in our schools.
- In some societies, you can literally not operate without etiquette. For example, among the Kikuyu of Kenya, seating and sharing a drink with the elders is a taboo that could invite rejection from the community if one is an outsider. It is the credentials engrained in our bodies and our behaviour that can affect positively or adversely our social living in new cultures.

Etiquette in Africa

- There are several simple rules of etiquette in Africa. One point worth remembering is that public displays of affection, although very common amongst friends of the same sex, are frowned upon between couples, even married ones.
- In East Africa, oppugning someone’s ethnic identity through ignorance or deliberate intention can be a grievous breach of etiquette. Africans themselves may engage in vicious slander along these ethnic lines, even between ethnic distinctions which seem trivial to an outsider, so tread carefully.
- Adoption of a “Western lifestyle” has little to do with a person’s affinity with their ethnic group. A lawyer in a three-piece suit en route to London, able to converse in Afrikaans and English, may also be a native speaker of Zulu and as proud and assured of his specific ethnic identity as the Welshman sitting next to him is of his own.
- Conversely, pride in tribal identity means that wearing a traditional dress does not necessarily indicate a lack of education or unfamiliarity with the ways of the world. A man dressed in traditional Maasai attire may have been educated at a university in Canada.
- As many Africans self-identify in terms of tribal or linguistic identity, Black people who visit from other parts of the world expecting to be accepted with a feeling of affinity may be disappointed. Acting on a naïve assumption about such a reception may offend the very people whom one hoped to feel kinship with.
- Can there be one code in our multi-cultural society? Is it true that each culture has its own codes of manners? In the following topic, we shall look at some of the behaviours that are universal in modern societies today.

The Five Universal Behaviours

1. Do not spit
2. Keep the noise down
3. Do not urinate in public
4. No throwing trash
5. Do not cut into a line, stand in line!

Universal Words of Kindness

1. Please
2. Thank you
3. Excuse me
4. Hello
5. Good bye

What we will describe in these sessions, however, are general hints that are linked to the basic “consideration for others” - a human quality that transcends cultural diversity. If we can enter into life with this concern: “my actions must at all times respect the individuality and human dignity of my neighbour,” then we will have understood the real meaning of etiquette. Remember, the heart of all the rules of etiquette is concern for others. The heart of true communication is communication with a heart.

In these sessions, we have divided the rules of etiquette into 11 areas of consideration. We will start with the body.

A) YOUR BODY

- Visual poise is the way we carry ourselves. Proper sitting, standing, walking and pivoting techniques are not just for models, but for everyone who wants to be well poised and graceful.
- Personal cleanliness is a criterion on which people will accept or reject us. Therefore, it is a must that we cultivate good bathing habits. A good bath with soap and water each day will help control body odour. Excessive scents and deodorants are no substitute. The appropriate frequency of bathing depends on the climatic conditions and seasons of the year but of course the golden rule is to take a bath everyday.
- It may seem unnecessary to state that your face is important. You may not be good-looking but you have a duty to look your best. This can be done by brushing your hair and washing your face with soap at regular intervals - don't forget the places that collect dirt most easily: in and behind the ears, the corner of the eyes, the nostrils, and the corners of the mouth. In the case of men, a daily clean shave or a groomed beard goes a long way in looking decent. In general, never attempt to leave your room before first checking yourself before a mirror.
- The way you carry yourself is as important as being clean. The well groomed person walks and sits erect with shoulders squarely drawn back to enable one to breathe fully.
- Breathe with your mouth closed. Many a time young men and women keep their mouth open.

B) YOUR CLOTHES

- There is a difference between being well dressed, just being dressed and being untidy. It is always important to be presentable and not a source of embarrassment to others.
- Clothes protect our bodies but they also preserve our dignity and enhance our appearance. They make a statement about who we are and what we stand for because it is ultimately up to each of us, as individuals, to decide what we wish to wear.
- Simplicity, sobriety in colour schemes, good tailoring, should be the dress code of a well-groomed person.
- Another important way to control body odour is to wash daily the clothes worn close to the body - shorts, underwear, socks, vests, bras and stockings.
- Clothes also need to be ironed well so as to make a person look presentable.

C) YOUR CONVERSATION

- A good conversationalist is polite, attentive, and interested in the other's conversation.
- Make it a rule, wherever you are, to take an interest in all that passes. Observe the characteristics of the persons you meet and listen to and take part in the subject of their conversations.
- The following are some conversational patterns of behaviour that need to be avoided if we desire to be agreeable and pleasant to people with whom we speak:
 - * Loud talking
 - * Interrupting
 - * Sneezing and blowing one's nose abruptly, without an “excuse me” (as if into the other's face)
 - * Yawning and whispering in company
 - * Staring at people in the face
 - * Talking without thinking
 - * Speaking without listening
 - * Bragging about oneself and one's achievements
 - * Sneering or being sarcastic in one's remarks



- * Passing snide remarks or sharing a private joke with one's neighbour while another is speaking.
- * Monopolising the conversation. The know-it-all, the show-off, the clown- all who try to grab the attention of their listeners.
- * Correcting grammar and pronunciation in public.
- * Getting too personal and calling attention to bodily characteristics: beauty, shape, size, defects and disabilities.
- * Fault-finding.
- * Inquisitiveness. (Questioning moderately is ok as long as they are not personal or prying questions)
- * Criticising people, events and situations.
- * Gossiping
- * Lengthy story telling, jokes...
- * Vulgarity in speech - this may attract attention or cause laughter in your listeners but will equally diminish their esteem of you.
- * Roving eyes: speaking to a person while roving your eyes at others without making eye-contact gives your partner the impression that you are not listening.
- * Arguing - instead learn to disagree agreeably. There is no need to venture an opinion unless it is asked.
- * Truth enforcing: people who think they alone possess the truth and have a right to express it make poor conversationalists. Some words to help you be polite even if you are sure you are right will help: 'maybe', 'I beg to differ' etc.
- * Exclusivism: While talking in a group, encourage all to participate - make eye contact with all the listeners (sometimes this is difficult as our eyes usually rest on those who make an impression on us or those we are attracted to.)

D) AT TABLE:

- It is at table, more than anywhere else, that one can tell who is a truly educated person.
- Meals form an important part of our common and social life. It is a time when one can have the best moments of sharing our lives as well as have a good time telling jokes and making fun.
- At the table, a smiling face - but certainly not with food stuffed in! - is always a good gesture. Closing one's mouth while eating is an art that must be perfected from one's early days.
- This will help prevent eating loudly and food falling out of the mouth on to one's lips and chin.
- Licking fingers, digging one's nose, picking teeth, and clearing one's throat as well as loud mouthed laughter - can ruin your neighbour's appetite.

Formal table-manners

- Take the seat you are assigned,
- Lift your chair, sit erect,
- Open your napkin and place on your lap,
- Wipe your mouth with the napkin before eating and drinking and from time to time, to avoid food or water messing up your face,
- Begin to serve yourself when the host directs you to or after the chief guest has began,
- Do not eat with elbows on the table,
- Lift only the corner of the glass to your mouth,
- Do not bend over your plate,
- Use the fork, knife and spoon with the help of your wrists not with the whole length of your arms,
- Do not heap food on your plate,
- Lift the fork or spoon to your mouth (do not bend down to the fork and spoon),
- When serving yourself bring the dish next to your plate,
- When you are not using your fork, spoon or knife, place them at the side of your plate with the sullied portion at the edge of your plate,
- Pick the serving spoon, dip it into the dish and bring the contents to your plate without dropping anything onto the table,
- You could steady the food from the dish to your plate with your fork, if it is cumbersome.
- Do not drop food out of your plate - even waste material like fish-bones, fruit skin, etc.
- Deposit waste material at the side of your plate.
- A simple nod of gratitude is enough when you are being served - there's no need to thank the server every time.
- Do not drink your water at one gulp on your arrival.
- Do not sip from your glass (or cup) with food in the mouth- it will help keep the glass from being stained with food particles.
- Pour contents of beverages into your glass - drinking directly from bottles is unacceptable,
- Test the heat of beverages with a spoon. If it is too hot, allow it to cool by stirring it (without noise). DO NOT blow into the cup.
- Always use a dry spoon for sugar - excessive stirring is unnecessary.
- Remove the spoon from the cup before drinking.
- Do not drink from the saucer.
- On leaving, place the spoon on the saucer.
- On the completion of a meal, leave your fork and spoon side by side on your plate (or crossed) with the reverse side facing you.

Exceptional circumstances:

- Do not hastily spit out hot food, but quench it with a drink of water before you swallow it.
- If you have to remove food once taken into the mouth due to a foreign matter, or if it is spoiled, do so with the help of the fork or spoon and deposit it at the side of your plate. Preferably cover the food with a piece of bread. Do this quietly without attracting much attention.
- If foreign bodies accidentally taken into the mouth have to be removed (like stones, pins, bones), do so with only the thumb and the forefinger and in a way that others won't see it and be upset.
- Manage accidents at table tactfully - without exaggeration. If you have caused the accident, apologise. If another has caused it, put the person at ease. Retrieve the fallen food with a spoon and place it in your quarter plate or at the side of your plate. Then take the corner of your napkin, dip it into your water glass, and lightly rub the spot and carry on with your eating.
- Coughing, sneezing, blowing your nose at table may be done by turning your head to one side and as quietly as possible. If you have an excessive bout of coughing caused due to irritation in the windpipe, leave the table immediately.
- If there is a wash basin situated in the dining hall near the dining table, it is usually meant for washing your hands. Do not use it for your mouth or throat ablution - which is usually done with loud sounds accompanying - not with people having their meals at the table nearby.
- Reaching out at table may be done only if things are at arms reach. If not, ask your neighbour politely to pass the item to you. Do not rise from your seat.
- Passing the jug, fork, spoon or knife is done with the handle pointing to the person receiving it.
- The volume of conversation at table should always be controlled. Loud guffaws, banging the table in delight, clapping hands, slapping each other on the back are all not acceptable at meal-time.
- No two partners should allow themselves to become engrossed in conversation to the exclusion of others.
- Do not talk business at table - or for that matter enter upon a controversial topic. Meal times are together-times and conversation at table should help build up the togetherness of the group.
- While serving:
 - * Serve from the left of each person,
 - * Start with the guest of honour, or the eldest person,
 - * Serve only beverages from the right.

E) PRIVACY

- Good manners requires that you give each one enough space and respect their moments of privacy. Minding your own business is an important part of etiquette. "How are you?" may be okay for starters but "Where are you going?" "When will you come back?" "What are you doing?" can be irritating.
- A closed door is an indication that the person on the other side desires privacy. It would therefore be wrong to barge in. If you wish to meet the person, use the door bell or gently knock.
- It is important to respect privacy of time just as we respect privacy of space. There are certain times people do not wish to be met and knowing this is important.
- Never stop to listen to a conversation which was not intended for you to participate in. When someone is on the phone in the same room as you are it is better to wait outside the room.
- If you are in another person's room, do not let your eyes wander around, worse still, do not pick up or handle any articles without due permission.
- When approaching the office of your superior, you find that he/she is busy, wait outside. Do not enter and start leafing through the calendar or touching the magazines or other books and articles on the table.
- Never read the letter belonging to someone else.
- Do not peer into what someone else is reading - unless you first excuse yourself and obtain permission.

F) INTRODUCTIONS

- When Introducing, remember this:
 - * Always present the younger person to the older person first.
 - * Always present the man/boy to the woman/girl first.
 - * Always present the person of lower rank to the superior first.
- When introducing a newcomer at a party, introduce the newcomer to the group of friends first and then each one individually to the newcomer with, perhaps, some added information about each one.
- If mentioning the names of a group of people that includes yourself, mention your name last. "Kamau, Obi, Rebecca, Omondi and I will be travelling to Delhi."
- Use the full name on formal occasions only.
- If you are not known and would like to join a group, say: "Hello, I'm Mwendwa, may I join you?"
- Introduce yourself to older persons - save them the embarrassment of trying to remember your name.
- Never ask a person to guess your name. Remember, you too can forget! Say it out straightaway: "Hello, I am Rehema."
- Usually when men are introduced to men, they shake hands. However, a man does not shake hands with the lady unless the lady makes the first move.
- Handshakes should not be limp, flabby or bone-crashing. Do it with grace and do not prolong it.
- On parting, shake hands again and say: "Glad to have met you." The receiver says "Thank you" or "Me too."
- A woman remains seated (if already seated) when being introduced. However, she rises when being introduced



to another woman or a distinguished person. A man always rises on being introduced to a woman.

- Do not go out of your way to introduce people when it is only a brief encounter and they are not likely to care about knowing each other, or when the place or time is not suitable.

G) TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE

- Always be courteous on the phone - use the polite phrases “please”, “May I”, “Thank you”, “Sorry” etc.
- If the environment is quiet, speak on the telephone in a voice that is pleasant and soft. If you need to raise your volume, do it to be heard by the person you are speaking to on the phone, not by everyone else in the room.
- Introduce yourself if the voice is not familiar to the receiver. If you are making a business call, do not presume that your receiver will recognise you or ask him/she to guess. It can be very irritating.
- After giving your name, graciously ask, “May I speak to Mr. Apollo?”
- Always be brief.
- If your purpose is purely of a social nature, then ask “Have you time for a chat?” before you launch out into an extended conversation.
- It is usually up to the person who makes the call to terminate the conversation.
- Do not forget to thank the caller at the end of a call.

H) MANAGING WASTE

- Never throw waste on the floor - it does not matter where you are. Use the bin.
- If you happen to see waste (especially dry waste) on the floor, pick it up.
- Make it a habit to separate dry garbage from wet garbage.
- With regard to dry waste, use a dust bin or a wastepaper basket.
- Never throw waste material like paper, tickets, chocolate wrappers, etc. on the floor. Look for a bin or a wastepaper basket.
- If you cannot find one, and the garbage is small, put it into your pocket to be disposed off when you find a bin.
- Dry waste may be recycled. If collected over a period of time it can be sold.
- With regard to wet garbage, use a bin with a lid. This will help keep flies away as well as control the odour from spreading.
- Wet waste may be recycled by letting it rot in a compost pit dug up in one’s garden. If worms are applied to this, the collected waste will turn into a rich fertiliser
- In a school environment, it is easier to manage waste disposal. We must first ensure that there are enough bins for people to use. Without such provisions, it is foolish to insist on cleanliness. Once the bins are installed, insistence on cleanliness with timely reminders will help. Punitive action may also be taken. For this, vigilant groups or guards would have to volunteer or be employed for the purpose. However, it is important to insist to the students that cleanliness is not a favour one is doing to the school but a duty one owes the school for using the space provided.

I) BODY WASTES

- In general, we may say that all body wastes must be properly controlled and not allowed to pollute the environment.
- Do not spit except into your handkerchief or into a wash basin.
- On sensing that a sneeze is about to come, reach out quickly for your handkerchief and sneeze into it. Otherwise, cover your mouth.
- Cover your mouth when you yawn or cough.
- Always use the toilet for your needs.
- English toilets have a seat which must be kept clean.
- When leaving the toilet, care must be taken to keep it spotlessly clean.

J) COMMON PROPERTY

- Here are some damages that our lack of concern have caused: stinking lavatories, dirtied walls, badly littered streets, torn seats, overflowing waste bins, etc.
- We fail to realise that common property is our very own property and that the money that goes into repairing the damage (if it is repaired at all) is spent from our own pockets, through taxes and increased fares.
- We must therefore resolve:
 - * To use common property well.
 - * To kindly remind people who forget by politely drawing their attention.
 - * To repair whatever damage - like a neighbourhood clean-up drive, or picking up the papers ourselves and teaching our children to do so.

K) LETTER WRITING

- A gracious person knows when, why and how to write a thank you note as well as how to reply to an invitation.
- A letter is nothing else than a conversation. It has however, one important difference: That which is spoken may not be remembered. But that which is written remains. Hence it is good to be brief, prompt, prudent and responsible - besides being presentable and polite.

Review

1. Etiquette has to do with good manners. Not so much our own good manners, but making other people feel comfortable by the way we behave. It's thinking of others and how they perceive us. Society should be sensitised on etiquette. Schools should also prioritise the teaching of social etiquette because this is what determines success of relationships in society be it business or personal.
2. In Africa, foreigners should keep note of the following:
 - * Displays of affection, although very common amongst friends of the same sex, are frowned upon between couples, even married ones.
 - * In East Africa, oppugning someone's ethnic identity through ignorance or deliberate intention can be a grievous breach of etiquette.
 - * Adoption of a "Western lifestyle" has little to do with a person's affinity with their ethnic group. Africans generally remain true to their culture despite their level of education and/or Western influence. In the converse, pride in tribal identity means that wearing traditional dress does not necessarily indicate a lack of education or unfamiliarity with the ways of the world.
 - * Black people who visit from other parts of the world expecting to be accepted with a feeling of affinity may be disappointed. Acting on a naïve assumption about such a reception may offend the very people whom one hopes to feel kinship with.
3. The five universal behaviours that are generally accepted in most modern societies include:
 - i. Do not spit
 - ii. Keep the noise down
 - iii. Do not urinate in public
 - iv. No throwing trash
 - v. Do not cut into a line, stand in line!
4. The five Universal Words of Kindness include:
 - i. Please
 - ii. Thank you
 - iii. Excuse me
 - iv. Hello
 - v. Good bye

Reflection

1. Africans, just like Americans and other world societies have their 'good behaviour' rooted in their unique cultural etiquette. Spend some time researching through books and interviewing key people such as parents and grandparents about your culture's unique cultural etiquette. After this, trace the roots of your current etiquette to either your tribe of origin or the culture in which you grew up.

Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

References

<http://www.establishyourselfny.com>

<http://www.expertvillage.com>

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