

Cultivate etiquette to prevent business bad habits

In April, The Creative Group published a national study identifying the top five job interview deal breakers — applicant behaviors that are sure fire ways to guarantee not receiving a job offer despite excellent credentials.

The fact that certain behaviors are likely to prompt hiring managers to remove a candidate from consideration is hardly surprising. What is interesting, however,

is that the top five acts cited by prospective employers all come down to one single issue: a lack of manners or etiquette.

Of the prospective employers polled, 77 percent said they would remove a candidate from consideration if the person used his or her cellphone during the interview. Tied for second place (at 70 percent) were the applicant showing up late without acknowledging it or not bringing items that were

requested. Wearing improper interview attire was a deal breaker for 69 percent of hiring managers, while speaking poorly of a past job or employer would hurt an applicant's chances with 62 percent of prospective employers.

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Make crafting company policies and procedures a team effort

Employers develop workplace policies not only to comply with regulatory requirements, but also as a way to communicate expectations of behavior to employees. As a companion to the policies, companywide procedures for implementing them are usually also established.

However, there might be times when HR representatives understand a legal requirement for a policy, but are not aware that a specific business area has a concern with the procedure used to implement the policy. As such, you may want to consider creating a committee with management representatives from different parts of the company to make sure a variety of viewpoints are considered when crafting policies and procedures.

While this cross-section of managers may not have your HR expertise, they might have knowledge about your company's specific business operations that could be

helpful. Another factor to consider is that while these managers are not the ultimate decision makers regarding policies, they are most likely responsible for the day-to-day enforcement of them. So, they might offer valuable insight into which policies and procedures could be better explained, or they might have ideas on better enforcement and discipline procedures.

To ensure that you get the most constructive input, you might want to invite participants to a brainstorming session away from the business premises and assure them that you are seeking candid feedback on the effectiveness of current policies. Sometimes an off-site meeting will inspire people to open up and think outside of the way things have always been done at your company. ♦

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Put in the context of a job candidate who is trying to make a good first impression, such behaviors generally make a significant impact. But what about the daily interactions that take place after an applicant is hired?

The truth is that most people have had moments in their professional lives when they have been late for a meeting, worn the incorrect attire for a work function, or used a personal cellphone at work. It happens, but you wouldn’t want such behavior to become the norm in your company.

Good manners can be cultivated, but so can bad habits. To ensure that your company maintains a culture where proper workplace etiquette is expected, try the following approaches:

Hire people who display politeness and courtesy. The aforementioned poll is on the right track. There is something to be said for not hiring rude applicants in the first place. After all, if someone behaves impolitely while putting his or her best foot forward trying to win your favor, what does that say about future everyday manners?

Carefully craft policies related to etiquette. What is considered good manners to one person is not necessarily considered good manners to another, so it is helpful for you to establish specific guidelines for employees to follow.

Some of these guidelines will be informal, like a clean-fridge policy posted in the kitchen to remind employees to clean out their leftovers on a regular basis. Keep in mind, however, that some policies you may consider an informal matter of etiquette will have regulatory implications.

For example: You determine that employees may display personal items at work, such as family photos and knickknacks, but you are concerned that some employees will be offended by the display of religious artifacts (e.g., a small Buddha statue), so you want to ban all religious displays.

While this may seem like a simple way to avoid conflict, under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, employers are required to reasonably accommodate the religious beliefs or practices of employees unless doing so creates an undue hardship. Religious decorations need to be allowed to the same extent that the company allows other (non-religious) items.

Train employees on business etiquette. Most employers train employees and supervisors on topics like bullying, diversity, and sexual harassment (in some states this is required by law), but few train employees on more general business etiquette topics.

Consider including a section on expected business etiquette in your new hire training, including how to write emails, answer the phone, use social networking sites, or how to appropriately socialize at business functions.

Swiftly deal with violators. Once you have established your expectations for employee behavior with both policies and training, you can more easily reprimand those employees who commit a workplace faux pas.

Some infractions will certainly fall under your regular discipline procedures (such as tardiness), but others will just be a matter of reminding the employee of expectations (“Bob, your leftover meatloaf has been in the fridge for three weeks; please properly dispose of it.”)

Either way, addressing violations immediately can prevent bad behavior from becoming a bad habit. ♦

Times to consider using an employment contract

Types of employment contracts vary widely and necessity is usually determined by business needs.

Most companies will generally choose only to contract with employees in specific situations, allowing company policies to communicate expectations to all at-will employees.

Here are a few situations in which you might want to consider using an employment contract:

Specific Skill Set: Perhaps your company has a project that requires the skills of an engineer, but

you don’t regularly hire engineers. If you would like to attract a certain caliber of candidate to the position, you may need to offer salary, benefits, or perks outside your regular employment policies. Hiring the individual as a contract employee may allow you more freedom in negotiations.

Confidentiality: Some positions have access to sensitive information (trade secrets, patented machinery) and a confidentiality clause requires those employees to keep your company’s secrets — usually long after they have

left your employment. A contract may not keep an employee’s lips sealed, but it will give you grounds to seek compensation in the event someone spills the beans.

Noncompetition: Usually used with outside sales representatives, these contracts have employees agree that for a certain amount of time after they leave your company (and within a specific geographical area), they will not become employed by a rival company, will not start their own competitive business, and will not solicit your customers. ♦

Business etiquette for supervisors

Good business etiquette is important for all employees in the workplace, but it is especially important for supervisors because how you are perceived by your colleagues and subordinates can impact your effectiveness as a leader.

Understanding the rules of business etiquette and consistently practicing good supervisory behaviors will not only help you avoid committing a workplace faux pas, but it will also help you earn the respect of your subordinates — and their respect can lead to greater loyalty, motivation, engagement, and productivity.

Use the following tips for workplace etiquette to enhance your effectiveness as a leader:

Dress the part. They say the clothes make the man (or woman), and adhering to your company dress code (perhaps even stepping it up a notch) can help you project an image of authority and poise. A sloppy or messy appearance can detract from this image and may even give people the impression

that you are disorganized, or take a careless approach to your work.

Mind your P's and Q's. Your grandmother didn't give you this advice for nothing — addressing people politely confers a certain level of respect for them as individuals.

People who feel generally respected are not only more motivated to comply with requests out of a sense of goodwill, but they are also usually inspired to take ownership of the results. So regardless of the fact that your team will likely do as you ask anyway, say please and thank you. You might just get better results.

Be friendly, but don't overshare. While it is important for you to build a rapport with your team, you should be careful not to share too much about your personal life and avoid asking questions about employees' personal lives. Stick to more general topics (think small talk about the weather, technology news, etc.) or discussions about the business world, trends, and competition.

Don't gossip. It should go without saying that a person who gossips can seem both insincere and untrustworthy, two qualities no one wants in a leader. A work atmosphere with closed doors and whispered conversations is likely to kill both morale and productivity.

If rumors start to circulate in your department, you should resist the urge to participate and instead address them directly to determine if

Brainstorming 101

Being asked to participate in a brainstorming discussion can seem daunting if you aren't sure what you are expected to bring to the table or how to frame it for the discussion. One way to avoid allowing your jitters to interfere with your effective participation is to anticipate what the conversation may entail and do some mental prep work:

Know the scope. Generally if you are being invited to join the conversation, the meeting facilitator should explain the scope of the project and why you are being included. If, however, such details aren't included in the invitation, you should ask: "Thank you for the invitation, would you please elaborate on the project so I know how I can best contribute?" Understanding the scope will also help you have appropriate expectations for outcomes.

Understand your point of view. It is natural for a person to hold an opinion about something without consciously understanding why. Awareness of your underlying reasons for thinking a certain way can help you better articulate your points in a group setting. Such self-awareness can also make it easier to glean insight from others' perspectives.

Keep an open mind. Mentally preparing for a brainstorming session does not mean making up your mind about the outcome ahead of time, it just means understanding how you might contribute. ♦

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there is a more productive way to handle the underlying grievances.

Be mindful of time. One of the most common ways to be unintentionally disrespectful of another person is to devalue his or her time. Start and end your meetings on time, and show up for other meetings on time and prepared with any necessary materials.

Also, while socializing can at times enhance working relationships, realize that it can interfere with productivity. Take note when it looks like people are attempting to end a conversation and get back to work.

Pay attention. It is very easy to get distracted in today's business world and fail to give people your undivided attention, but that attention is important to showing

people that you value their opinions and contributions.

When meeting with others, engage them with eye contact, listen to what they have to say, and don't interrupt when they are speaking. Also put away your cellphone, and momentarily ignore your email, instant messages, social media alerts, etc. ♦

Work and socializing: Tips for having fun, but staying professional

Socializing for business has different rules than socializing with your friends. If you treat the situations the same way, you are likely to make a few mistakes that can negatively impact your career prospects.

Whether you are having dinner with clients, golfing with your boss, organizing an event for subordinates, or attending a conference with colleagues, paying attention to business etiquette can help maintain your professional reputation.

The following are some tips to help you avoid blunders while still having fun in business socializing situations:

Don't be the first to arrive, or the last to leave. Showing up early for an event can make your hostess uncomfortable as he or she might be engaged in last-minute preparations. Plan to arrive on time and then leave while the event is still going strong. If you're not sure about the appropriate time to make an exit, watch an executive you admire. When he or she leaves, follow suit.

Remember your table manners. Always be polite to servers, saying please and thank you, and never talk with your mouth full. It helps to take small bites so you can quickly swallow if you are asked a question and need to respond. If you are at a cocktail mixer instead of a sit-down dinner, keep your plate and drink in your left hand so your right hand is free to shake when greeting people.

Limit your alcohol. There is nothing respectable about a drunk. Think about how you perceive others who drink too much at a work event — stumbling around, sloshing their drinks, laughing and talking a bit too loudly. Do you still respect them or their work the next day?

One way to limit the effects of alcohol is to eat a little something before you go to an event, even if food is being served. Alcohol will have a greater effect on an empty stomach. This trick also helps you limit your

food servings, which aids your ability to take smaller bites to facilitate conversation.

Keep your conversation appropriate. If you wouldn't say it in the office, don't say it at a work function. Sometimes people relax too much in a social setting (especially if alcohol is involved) and tell stories or jokes that can make people uncomfortable. Aim to discuss nonwork topics so you can get to know your companions, but keep the conversation benign. People usually feel comfortable discussing travel, sports, or movies, but steer clear of politics or other polarizing news items.

Listen more than you talk. If you're the one doing all the talking, you not only run the risk of being viewed as self-centered or arrogant, but you also miss out on the opportunity to get to know your colleagues. Ask polite noninvasive questions about their hobbies and interests, and then give them your full attention while listening to the answers.

Don't be cliquy. In social settings we tend to gravitate toward the people we already know and feel comfortable around, but one of the benefits of business socializing is the chance to get to know people with whom you do not usually interact. Resist the temptation to sit and talk to only your usual circle of co-workers, and instead mingle with people from other departments.

Don't blur the lines of authority. Socializing with your boss outside of the workplace can be a great way to get some one-to-one time in a more relaxed setting. The danger inherent to this relaxed setting, however, is that the interaction can quickly become too relaxed or friendly. Remember that spending time with your boss is always about work, regardless of whether you are engaged in work activities or not. If you are getting along well on the golf course or at a cocktail party, he or she is still your boss, not your new best friend. ♦

360-degree feedback: An opportunity for development

One of the biggest challenges in effectively conducting 360-degree reviews, which are designed to create awareness of both a person's strengths and weaknesses, is the openness of those involved to receiving feedback and their willingness to act on areas identified for improvement. While most people would agree that hearing positive feedback is enjoyable, very few feel that way about criticism.

If you and your subordinates have been selected to participate in a 360-degree review process, it is helpful to keep in mind that the goal of the program is likely professional development, and any feedback received (both positive and negative) is aimed at identifying opportunities for continuous improvement and personal growth. To that end, keep the following in mind as you embark on the journey:

All feedback can be constructive: While reading the results of your review, try to remain positive and keep an open mind even if you don't get the results you were expecting. No one is perfect; everyone has strengths and weaknesses. If you choose to use the information presented to change for the better, then all the feedback is constructive — even if it is less stellar than you would like.

Walk in their shoes. Self-awareness can be a difficult journey, especially if you have a tendency to respond negatively to criticism by becoming defensive or brood-

ing with hurt feelings. While it is normal to be taken aback by negative comments, especially if you are perceived by someone in a way that you feel is inaccurate, try to view the situation as a growth opportunity. Is there a reason people may view you this way? Is there something about your behavior you should alter to change co-workers' perceptions?

Don't focus on the negative. While you want to be introspective as you think about behaviors that need improvement, you don't want to dwell on the negative. Remember to also celebrate the positive feedback you receive and consider how you can use those traits to improve in other areas.

Identify actionable items. When looking for development opportunities, a good place to start is with common concerns among respondents. For example, if only one person said that you are a poor communicator, it may be their personal perception and it may not be entirely accurate. However, if multiple people said the same thing, you will want to include communication skills in the development plan you create with your manager.

Be open-minded about a development plan. While you



may think you have identified all the actionable items for a development plan, your manager may have input on some other development opportunities that might play better to your strengths. You should discuss the results of your review with your manager, and together select two or three areas for improvement. Limiting your action items will help you stay focused and ensure that you meet your goals for professional development.

Share the review results with respondents, and follow up. Participants took the time to complete the review and are likely interested in hearing the results. While you are not obligated to share the details, it might be beneficial to let your team know which areas of concern are being acted upon. Schedule a follow-up 360-degree review for next year to check if improvements were made. ♦

Test Yourself

Should you sponsor a former slacker?

You receive a call from a prospective employer asking for a reference for a former employee who worked in your department, but who did not report to you.

You are hesitant to answer the caller's questions because you don't really have anything positive to say about the employee. While you didn't work directly with him, he gave you the impression that he was a bit of a slacker. He never seemed particularly motivated to

get work done and only appeared to do the bare minimum to earn his paycheck every week.

Can you tell the prospective employer to steer clear of this applicant? **For the answer, turn to page 4s.** ♦

Test Yourself Solution

Stick to the facts

Generally speaking, there is little risk of liability for a defamation claim as long as a former employer provides factual references in good faith.

In this case, however, you have no evidence to support your opinion that the former employee is a slacker, so sharing this supposition with a prospective employer could put your company at risk for a lawsuit if the former employee is

prevented from finding work due to your poor reference. You are better off transferring the prospective employer to human resources where they can provide the caller with more accurate information. ♦

On a High Note

Dangers of miscommunicating expectations are no joke

A phone company was going to hire a single team of telephone pole installers, and the boss had to choose between two teams of seemingly equally qualified candidates. Because the teams were arguably matched in skill and experience, the boss met with the two teams and devised a competition to see who would get the job.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” said the boss. “Each team will install telephone poles out on the new county road for one day. The team that installs the most phone poles wins the job.”

Both teams headed out to work for the day.

At end of the day, Team A came back into the office and the boss asked how many telephone poles they had installed. The guys said that it was tough going, but they’d put in 12 poles.

Forty-five minutes later, Team B returned to the office totally exhausted.

The boss asked, “How many telephone poles did you guys install today?”

One of the men wiped his brow and sighed, “Well, it wasn’t easy, but we managed to get three in the ground.”

The boss gasped, “Three?! The other team put in 12 telephone poles!”

“Yeah,” responded the sweating man, “but you should see how

much they left sticking out of the ground!”

Clearly, this telephone company story is meant to be a joke, but it can also be used to represent the dangers of making assumptions and failing to communicate expectations to employees.

In this story the boss has assumed that both teams are matched in skill and experience in installing telephone poles. He doesn’t seek to verify that his assumptions are correct with a skills test of a single supervised pole installation, but rather gives simplistic instructions to “install” poles and sends the teams off to do their worst.

He compounds his mistaken assumptions by never leaving his office to check on the progress of the teams’ work, and then relying on their reported activities to determine their success at completing the assigned task. For all this boss knows, the 12 poles installed by

Team A are not installed correctly either.

Not a laughing matter

While this, admittedly silly, example of poor leadership probably makes you grin and shake your head, real world failures to communicate with employees abound, and you may have been guilty of a few of them yourself.

The next time you don’t get the results you were expecting from an assigned task, you may want to ask yourself if you might be partially to blame. Did you make assumptions about the skill and knowledge of the employees involved? Did you clearly communicate your expectations and give instructions? Did you check on progress during the project?

Think about those three buried telephone poles ... and all the wasted effort that could have been prevented if the boss had only taken the time to communicate with the teams in the first place. ♦



Do Your Supervisors Know...

... how to use 360-degree reviews for professional development?

One alternative to the traditional concept of succession planning (where individuals are hand-picked and groomed for key positions), is to instead focus on development plans that build core skills across the organization.

With this model, companies determine which critical skills are required to meet the needs of key projects and programs now and into the future, and which employees show the aptitude to learn those skills. The companies then design employee development and recruitment programs around building and maintaining those skills, making sure to fill any gaps.

One of the ways to determine which employees are more likely to be able to perform in the future is to conduct 360-degree reviews. Unlike standard performance or skill evaluations, the feedback in a 360-degree review comes from a variety of people who are familiar with an employee's work — not just the employee's immediate supervisor — and includes questions assessing an employee's strengths and weaknesses outside of technical skills.

Such an assessment can provide a more complete picture of how an employee approaches his or her work because you not only learn whether the employee satisfactorily completes tasks, but also how he or she interacts with others and is perceived in the workplace.

For 360-degree reviews to be successful tools in creating employee development programs, you will need to make sure your employees understand the goals of the program. Also, you will need to train them how to receive feedback (both negative and positive) as well as how to put the information to constructive use.

Clarifying the goals

Before conducting the reviews, hold an orientation meeting to review the process and discuss which skills and competencies will be evaluated, how they will be used in employee development programs, and how they correlate to the company's overall strategic goals.

You will also want to discuss such things as confidentiality and whether the information obtained will be used in conjunction with performance evaluations. Many companies choose to keep performance evaluations and 360-degree reviews separate, using the review information only for employee development, rather than including it in determining pay raises or specific promotions. Part of the reason for this is that employees are more likely to be candid in providing feedback to colleagues if there is no risk of impacting a coworker's compensation.

Receiving feedback

Those employees who will be receiving 360-degree feedback should be given some training on how to view negative feedback as valuable to facilitating positive changes. It is good to remind employees that everyone has both strengths and weaknesses, no one is perfect, and that feedback allows them opportunities for personal growth and development.

Employees should be given tips about how to read feedback results objectively, and how to identify areas for improvement. For example, when choosing areas for improvement, employees will want to pick skills or competencies where there is an overlap in comments. If multiple respondents say that the employee is timid about expressing ideas, the employee may want to focus on assertiveness training. On other hand, if only one respondent



gives this feedback, it may just be his or her personal perception.

Putting feedback to use

Employees who receive 360-degree feedback should meet individually with their supervisors to discuss the results and set goals. With the insight provided by the review, the employee and supervisor can map out an action plan for employee development.

For example, the feedback might reveal that an employee needs to improve her technical skills, but perhaps she has great collaboration abilities. On the other hand, an employees in the same department who is considered a highly-skilled asset may discover that he has trouble collaborating with colleagues. There might be an opportunity for a supervisor to arrange for the two coworkers to work together for training or informal mentoring to improve both of their weaknesses.

Obviously not all situations will turn out as neatly as the aforementioned example, but both discoveries are beneficial when designing employee development programs, as both soft skills and technical skills can be taught to willing students. ♦

Supervisor Pullout: See page 3s for "360-degree feedback: An opportunity for development"

Business breakup: What to do when employees quit

Perhaps you don't see a lot of voluntary turnover in your industry, or maybe you have experienced a higher rate of employee retention due to the economy over the last several years. Whatever the reason, some HR practitioners are just more familiar with the steps involved in terminating an employment relationship than they are with the flip side — an employee quitting the company.

If you have recently been on the receiving end of an "it's not you, it's me" conversation from a departing employee, you may have some questions about your responsibilities in this breakup. The following scenarios can help you navigate this unfamiliar territory:

An employee gave his two-week notice, but we would prefer to accept his resignation immediately. Are we required to pay him for the two weeks anyway? If we don't allow him to work the two weeks, will he get unemployment benefits?

Most states follow an at-will employment doctrine, meaning that (unless there is an employment contract in place) the employer can fire an employee at any time for any reason (so long as that reason is not illegal, i.e., discrimination), and an employee can quit at any time for any reason.

Thus, while it is certainly a courtesy for an employee to give a two-week notice, he is not obligated to give it, nor are you obligated to allow him to work through the notice period.

You may choose to accept the resignation immediately, and you are not required to pay the employee through the notice period. If the employee is classified as nonexempt, you are not required to pay him for hours not worked, and if he is exempt, you are allowed to pay a portion of his salary for the last week of employment.

As for unemployment, it will depend on the state. The adjudication process for unemployment benefits varies from state to state and is done on an individual basis. In most states, employees are disqualified for benefits if they voluntarily quit their most recent job without good cause, but they may be eligible for benefits if they are unemployed through no fault of their own. Accepting an employee's resignation early puts an employer in a bit of a gray area, and in some states, the employee could be eligible for at least some unemployment benefits.

Even if you don't accept the resignation early, an employee who quits could still be eligible for unemployment if he or she quits for "good cause," which may even include issues unrelated to your company. For example, in some states, an employee can collect unemployment benefits if he quits to take a different job but the new job falls through, or if he quits because his spouse has taken a job that requires the family to relocate.

An employee has resigned to take a job with another company and wants us to pay out his unused vacation time. Are we required to do this?

Like many situations you encounter in human resources, this is a matter of state law. Some states consider earned vacation time to be part of wages, and any unused vacation earned by the employee must be paid out when he or she quits.

Other states don't require you to pay out unused vacation unless you have a policy or an implied agreement that says you will do so.

If you operate in one of these states, and you don't want to pay out unused vacation, you should establish a written policy that specifically outlines the conditions under which payout would be denied, such as an employee quitting without notice. ♦



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