

Business Etiquette 101:

“Barely time to wait”

By Jill Matlow, Wall Street Dead aHead Family Member



Photo courtesy of pixabay.com

“Who just joined”?

“Hi, It’s Bob, sorry I’m late to the call”.

Remember those days? Sitting with your colleagues in a conference room, staring at the speaker phone, waiting for the latecomers to join the call. There was always a ‘Bob’ too, who came equipped with another excuse for his lateness. Something tells me ‘Bob’ is late to everything: important meetings, client presentations, and probably business lunches too.

Are you a ‘Bob’?

We’ve all experienced a ‘Bob’ scenario and it’s not fun. Our time is precious and wasted minutes have a domino effect, impacting the rest of our workday. If you are late, it is

disrespectful to those counting on you and it ultimately creates the impression of a self-centered mentality. Proper business etiquette demands a macro perspective, one inclusive of others and their needs to facilitate the *company's* goals, not your own.

I had a boss who was chronically late to everything: we missed flights, client pitches and new business prospects due to her lateness. It created a whole new level of stress for me. As my friends and family know, being on time (which for me is usually 15 minutes early) is a given. Being late fills me with anxiety and I cannot understand this as a habit. Can you relate?

Lateness was just one of the challenges I experienced in corporate America. Here's something else I encountered. Have you ever taken weeks or months to set up a meeting with a business colleague only to have them cancel at the last minute or not show at all? It's all too common these days.

A good friend of mine once told me a story of a meeting she helped orchestrate between two people she knew well. Both parties had agreed to move forward with this meeting, scheduling an official time to connect. In the end, the meeting was canceled by one of the parties only minutes before it was set to happen. This is where it gets very awkward. If you are the person setting up this meeting between two people, your reputation is at stake. I once heard the expression: "You're responsible for the effort, not the outcome" but it's hard not to feel some level of responsibility when things go south. Don't you agree?

Let's dive into another aspect of business etiquette – common courtesy. Have you experienced the following scenario in your career? Your contract has ended, but as a professional courtesy and in good faith, you decide to go the extra mile and have a follow up meeting with a prospective client. All you intended was to finish what was started, but your plan backfires and credit is not given where deserved. This happened to me after a post-employment meeting when I found out a deal was brokered and I never received a commission. I wasn't even told the deal closed!

Live and learn. The lesson here: Not everyone shares your definition of business etiquette, integrity, loyalty and respect. Many years in the professional landscape gave me an unfortunate reality check – you cannot assume everyone to be on your wavelength.

Fortunately, one person who is on my wavelength is Deb Solomon, founder of Wall Street Dead aHead Networking Events®. In addition to her integrity, she is 'no nonsense' when it comes to business and doesn't cut corners. Deb personally gets acquainted with everyone before they join WSDA, with the intent of making sure they mirror her level of professionalism, business etiquette and ethical behavior. This is why it's incredibly disappointing for Deb when she hears that Family Members do not behave in this fashion. In essence, they are a reflection of her brand, just as employees in a company

are. Deb values professional etiquette and expects her WSDA Family Members to do the same.

I spoke to some WSDA Family Members to find out how they have handled precarious situations with both clients and colleagues in the workplace when their business etiquette was compromised or put to the test. Other Family members shared anecdotes illustrating successful workplace courtesy and how those scenarios might be accomplished.

Here's what they had to say:

"I met with a prospective new client from the greater St. Louis area. In the course of conversation and in getting to know him, he shared with me how he enjoyed growing up in the area but now 'there were too many minorities taking over, who contributed nothing to society, commit tons of crimes, get too many free handouts and are taking over the area he grew up in'.

His conversation was sprinkled with derogatory and racist comments that made me completely uncomfortable. I got my point across to this client that I didn't appreciate the way he spoke, and our meeting was short-lived. Needless to say, we didn't get any extra business from this one client but I'm ok with that. I feel sometimes we need to ask ourselves, 'do we want to do business with a person like this'? If he was so open about his racism with a mere stranger, is he likely to be a valued client? Sometimes it makes more sense to not waste much time on people like this and move on to the next opportunity."

Brian Liptak - Equity Product Manager — Alliance Bernstein

Takeaway: If your customers' values and opinions do not match up with yours, chances are, it will not be a good fit in the long run. First impressions are very telling. Choose your words wisely.

"I was the captain of our law firm softball league. We were playing a game in Central Park against a rival law firm. One of the law school interns on our team (who was playing catcher) was flirting with all of the opposing batters as they came up to bat. She was prancing all around the field throughout the game. Also, when she was up at bat, she got into a heated argument when an umpire called her out on strikes.

Her behavior was completely inappropriate and reflected poorly on her and poorly on the rest of us and especially our firm. You never know if there are clients or potential clients around and you don't want other law firms to think that you are a joke.

As the captain, I was completely embarrassed and apologized to the other team and the umpire. Eventually, I did remove her from the game and told her not to come to future games. As an aside, she did not last very long at the firm.”

Scott Seamon - In-House Counsel – Dexia Credit Local

Takeaway: When engaging in off-business activities with your colleagues, make sure your personal etiquette and behavior is appropriate, as you never know when potential clients are in the vicinity. You don't want to jeopardize the reputation of your company.

“One particular memory I have is when I worked as a senior banker for one of the leading firms on Wall Street and had a young analyst preparing work for me on a transaction. It was a very complex deal, and he was completing tasks at a rapid pace but my mind was going numb reviewing his work day after day. I knew he was very smart (and his work rarely had mistakes).

I suggested that before just forwarding me his completed work, he take a few minutes after each task, reflect on what the conclusions were, and send me his thoughts along with the analysis. This way he was learning more about the larger dynamics of the deal (not just task focused), and it gave me an initial viewpoint to consider and react to – rather than reviewing work product in a vacuum. It was amazing how well this worked! He felt empowered and understood more about the deal since we could then discuss his conclusions, and it helped me get much greater leverage out of a valuable resource. I think he learned an important lesson about managing upwards, and we developed a closer working and personal relationship as a result.”

Jim Redpath - Managing Director – Cypress Associates LLC

Takeaway: Sharing the big picture viewpoint with people you are managing will serve you well in the long run. See things from another's perspective before jumping to conclusions and aim to create a comfortable work environment where people can thrive.

“My last role as a client-facing auditor demanded daily interaction and inevitable pestering with finance departments. Every day was a challenge to strike a balance between progressing the audit and keeping the client happy. Disagreeing was a regular occurrence, but needed to be approached carefully. From my business education I learned: the customer is always right. However, in this type of role, skepticism is required and in order to comfortably and thoroughly complete my work, there were moments I needed to be assertive in my opinions, whether or not they conflicted with the client.

In one particular task, I came across a series of errors that required endless back and forth. The frustration was mutual and building at an increasing rate. Oftentimes there was multiple back and forth throughout a single workday, where I was confronted with both aggravating, mismatched calculations followed by unpleasant and rude rebuttals. Naturally, I wanted to defend myself or match this attitude. However, ultimately I recognized the necessity in keeping my frustration internal and not allowing my emotions to surface with any client interaction.

It is of utmost importance to keep the client happy and provide as little reason possible for them to grow angry or defensive. Not only does this help the longevity of the relationship, but it provides a better environment for productively approaching the tasks at hand. Ultimately, you are on the same side and whether or not this is a mutual understanding, it is crucial for you to maintain a collected composure and stay positive.”

Rebecca Gitomer, CPA – Executive Assistant to CEO at Wall Street Dead aHead Networking Events®

Takeaway: Going the extra mile for clients you value will result in a win-win for your company. Recognizing and being sensitive to clients’ shortcomings and working around them will always benefit you.

In a perfect world, everyone would be punctual, no one would flake out on meetings, and workplace etiquette with mutual respect would be a given. This quote by Will Cuppy sums it up best:

“Etiquette means behaving yourself a little better than is absolutely necessary”

In other words, don’t be a ‘Bob’.