

# Napkins, Knives, and Forks: Etiquette Education at the University of Cincinnati's College of Applied Science

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***Abstract**--When students finish their degrees they have mastered certain levels of expertise in their chosen disciplines. However, an important gap exists in their knowledge base. These students often lack the requisite social skills (etiquette knowledge) to successfully climb the corporate ladder. Professionals in business and industry know that how they look and act in social settings often determines the level of success they achieve in their organizations. This report describes the results of a course developed at the University of Cincinnati's College of Applied Science to teach business etiquette to engineering technology students. The course covers subjects employers confirm as crucial to successful entrance into the corporate world. Units such as appropriate business dress, proper table manners, proper introductions, telephone use, and how to conduct business in another country are covered. Examples of problems to help students analyze and apply etiquette knowledge are also included.*

*Index Terms*—business etiquette, international protocol, table manners, social skills

In contemporary society, technology reigns. Palm pilots rule. Cell phones abound. American society, and others as well, operates around the clock. We eat fast food, drive fast cars, and we have the ability to conduct business 24 hours a day. We skimp on sleep, electing instead to rise early to exercise before work. We speed to our jobs while gulping down coffee or some fast food item purchased at the drive-thru. After work, we rush home to a quick dinner, ferry the children to various activities, and arrive home dead-tired, although we still have email to answer before falling into bed. The next day we do it all over again. People are continually in a hurry, multi-tasking themselves into oblivion. Is it any wonder that nerves are frayed and that many people find themselves operating “close to the edge”? In the aftermath, politeness and courtesy, civility if you will, often get left behind.

The media report stories such as the woman who became enraged when the customer in front of her at the check-out line exceeded the 12 item limit. She actually followed the woman to her car and began to beat her. Or the out-of-control man who was cut off in traffic by another driver. His anger was so great that he jumped from the car and pulled the woman's little dog from the car window and flung it into traffic to its death. Extreme examples you say? Perhaps.

Yet, they reflect the attitude and lack of self-discipline some folks exhibit on a daily basis. As tragic as these examples are, they happen because some one chose to ignore the code—the proper protocol. People violate protocol every day.

Yet protocols hold our society together. Even technology functions within them. Consider the computer. It won't function properly, if one doesn't follow the proper protocol for booting it up and letting it check the internal system. Even machines have to follow rules. Likewise, society needs rules to function properly. Rules of behavior are nothing new. As Dorothea Johnson, C.E.O. of the Protocol School of Washington, notes: “Protocol has been observed since the ancient Egyptians produced the first known book,

*The Instructions of Ptahhotep*. Along with the plow and the twelve-month calendar, they invented manners...The term ‘protocol’ is derived from two Greek words, protos, meaning ‘the first’ and kolla meaning ‘glue’...Today, the word protocol serves as the code of international politeness that blends diplomatic form, ceremony, and etiquette”[1]. Just as protocol or etiquette serves as the “glue” to hold society together in positive ways, etiquette smoothes the way for successful relationships in the corporate sector. College graduates who display knowledge of business etiquette have an edge over those less-informed. As Lillian Chaney, points out “Schools, particularly institutions of higher learning, must convey to students that good manners are essential to climbing the corporate ladder” [2].

At the University of Cincinnati's College of Applied Science we've addressed this need. Our students earn baccalaureate degrees in various fields of engineering technology. In addition to their technical courses, our students study professional communication, both spoken and written, as well as ethics. Recently, we've added an entire course in etiquette to our curriculum, “Global Civility” (Civility and Manners for the Global Age). I developed this course last year in response to industry's request. Our graduates have fine technical knowledge, both theoretical and applied, but they often lack knowledge in the social graces.

I've taught this course twice now, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Students are enthusiastic and appreciate the opportunity for such a course. Our local paper, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, wrote an article about our final dinner exam, and the Associated Press picked up the

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story. Ever since, calls and emails continue to arrive daily. The BBC even called to request an interview. Manners matter. People have an interest in the course. The need exists, and others recognize it as well.

The course covers areas personnel managers deem necessary in order to advance to managerial levels. These areas include:

- Making introductions properly
- Using proper table manners
- Managing social functions
- Dressing appropriately
- Showing thoughtfulness by responding to invitations, writing thank-you notes, sympathy notes, and notes of congratulations and appreciation
- Speaking correctly (grammatically)
- Using the telephone properly (including cell phones)
- Conducting business in another country

The course meets twice a week, for 75 minutes each class period and is highly participatory. It culminates with a final dinner exam at one of Cincinnati's finest upscale French restaurants. I begin the course by discussing the concept of civility. We talk about what it means to behave as a civil person, and why it is important to the concept of professionalism. I introduce historical examples such as one Dale Keiger noted from the

*Galateo*, in 1558, 'Nor is it seemly, after wiping your nose, to spread out your handkerchief and peer into it as if pearls and rubies might have fallen out of your head... What, then shall I say of those...who carry their handkerchiefs about in their mouth?' [3] Others include George Washington's translation of *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior In Company and Conversation* circa 1744 [4] and Margaret Visser's work which notes that "every human society without exception obeys eating rules, what ritual is and why we need it at dinner (cannibalism, for instance, is found to conform to strict laws and controls); and the meaning of feasting and sacrifice [5]. Then we move into subjects such as dining skills. We cover things such as proper napkin use, posture at the table, how to excuse yourself, and proper dinner conversation.

Throughout the first half of the course we practice proper handshakes, introductions, giving and receiving toasts, and we also discuss what constitutes proper business dress in the contemporary corporate arena. I've written problems to help students think critically about what it means to apply business etiquette knowledge in the workplace. One problem focused on the duties of a host who entertains a visiting dignitary:

### PROBLEM

You are a recent graduate with a degree in Mechanical Engineering Technology, and you have been working nine months at Triton Steel Corporation. Your boss

tells you he has big plans for you. He informs you that you will host a dinner at the Shady Nook Country Club in honor of Mr. Tren Wong, an executive from Singapore. What do you know? What do you need to know?

Students research the various duties of a host. One student wrote, "I made arrangements with the country club for our company to pay for the event and to reserve enough table space for our party of 12 people. I gave the names and ranks of individuals attending to organize the seating arrangement. Singaporeans feel an even number of guests is a sign of good fortune. The seating arrangements were set up in a hierarchical manner, for this is standard protocol in Singapore. Obviously, removing our shoes will not be a part of this dining event for we are in America... I have been practicing my toast, '*yam seng*,' meaning 'bottoms up' to further impress our colleague. We will be toasting all of his hard work and dedication to our fine company these past 10 years." When I developed the problem a bit further and asked them to assume the duties of the guest of honor, another student wrote, "I know that I do not drink when toasted as the guest of honor. I also know that I will need to give a short heartfelt acknowledgement and thank you to the guests and especially the host. Therefore, after the toast is given I will stand and say the following: Thank you all very much. I am very happy to be here this evening. I would like to give my appreciation to our distinguished host, Mr. Smith, for his work putting this dinner together for us. You have all been very kind and generous. Thank you all, and thank you, Mr. Smith."

Another problem focused on rampant cell phone use:

### PROBLEM

Your boss, Rhoda Finkelstein, has had it with the proliferation of cell phone use at your company in particular and society in general.

She wants to inform employees about the proper and improper use of cell phones. She tells you she wants you to write an article for the employee newsletter which gives the proper etiquette involved with cell phones. You, Pat Woodward, are a bit taken aback. You can't tell her that you're a cell phone junkie yourself. You adore your cell phone. You talk on it as much as possible, even while driving, shopping, and in restaurants. You find it an amazing tool. Yet Ms. Finkelstein is your direct supervisor. What kinds of information will you put in the article? Who will your audience be? Write the article.

One student noted in his paper, "Rage against cell phone abusers is quickly rising thanks to the many discourteous users. The novelty of someone having a cell phone has worn off now that the phones are so common... let your ears cool off once in a while...NEVER let the phone ring during a movie, wedding, or funeral. This is the quickest way to bring your own funeral."

## PROBLEM

Another assignment includes writing a note of congratulations to a colleague who's just been promoted. One student wrote, "Congratulations on your new promotion to District Manager of XYZ Corporation. The hard work that you put in as store manager did not go unnoticed. It's great that you have been given this opportunity, but you will be missed at this location. It will be tough finding a replacement for you here. Congratulations again, and good luck in this new position. Sincerely ..."

## PROBLEM

This problem proves a bit more difficult for students. They are asked to write a sympathy note, a sensitive situation, to a colleague who's just experienced the loss of a family member. This particular student rose to the occasion. He wrote, "I was sorry to learn about the passing of your mother. I want to share your sorrow, and let you know that my thoughts and prayers have been with you. The love of a mother can never be replaced, but I hope you can take comfort knowing that you have family and friends that care about you. May God be with you and your family during these difficult times. Sincerely..."

Students learn through these exercises that the person who can write an effective personal note is light years ahead of the one who just sends a card with a pre-printed message.

The last four weeks of the term students form groups of four to five members. Each group chooses a country to research and uses the following problem:

## PROBLEM

Your boss has just informed you that your company has now landed a contract with Reibold International in (insert name of country), and you will be sending executives there to conduct business. The executives who will be going there have little knowledge about this country, and none has ever visited it. Your boss tells you that you are now the head of the newly formed Business Etiquette and International Protocol Committee. Your committee's job is to compile a document which employees traveling to this country can use in order to successfully represent your organization. What should the document contain?

Students research various topics such as dining skills, gift-giving, gestures, exchange of business cards and topics to avoid. They compile an executive's business guide to that country. During the last week of class, each group gives a twenty minute presentation where they share their findings as well as the final guide. It's interesting to observe some of

their reactions such as the group who were surprised to learn that if one is given a gift in Korea, one shouldn't open it in the presence of the giver since to do so is considered rude. Rather, one should set the gift aside for the time being. The same group noted that political conversation might be fraught with tension and that one ought to avoid discussing the Korean War or the Japanese Occupation. A member of another group, a first-year female student, was shocked to learn that if she visited Saudi Arabia, she would not have the same freedom to move about as a male counterpart. The group that studied Australia was delighted to discover that it is common practice for Australians to split the bill for business dinners and that tipping at restaurants is optional. They were also relieved to learn that most Australians have never eaten kangaroo meat, a delicacy, so business visitors would probably not encounter it while dining Down Under. Students see how easy it is to offend someone without meaning to do so. They learn to sensitize themselves to the different customs of various cultures.

We end the quarter by reviewing proper business attire and proper dining skills in anticipation of the final dinner exam. Students are excited and understandably nervous. However, without exception they rise to the occasion, and a truly, gratifying metamorphosis takes place. These same students who sat before me with their baseball caps on backwards, wearing their trusty Reeboks for the past ten weeks change into men and women enjoying a business dinner in an elegant restaurant. They have learned important skills and acquired the necessary confidence to make a successful entrance into the corporate world.

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