



## Your Passport to Professionalism: Module 3

# Professional Etiquette

## Step 1—Learn

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### Introduction

“You want to wear *that* to the wedding?”

“Clean your plate.”

“Thank you for making breakfast for the family while I was sick.”

“No singing at the table.”

“You can’t go until you clean your room.”

“I like how you use your words, not your fists.”

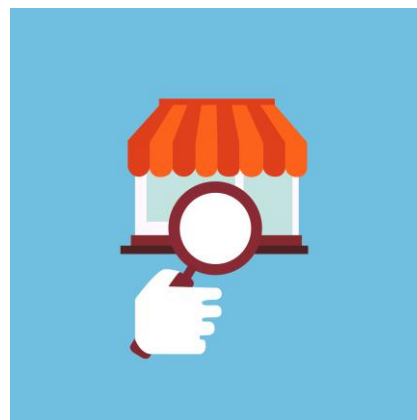
Have you ever heard these comments from parents or friends?

Every family, organization, club, or group has rules and expectations. To participate in any group you need to know what pleases others, what is expected, what is optional, what irritates others, and what will get you kicked out. When you join new groups, it’s common to feel clueless and confused. You simply have not learned how to negotiate group expectations. How should you dress, talk, act, use humor, and get things done?

This module provides some examples of classic office etiquette expectations. You will work through these examples and check things out with your boss to be sure you understand how to fit in for a successful experience.

### So, who cares about professional etiquette?

The short answer is: **your boss**. Students are often surprised by the things supervisors and office staff think about them when they are just acting “normally” for a student. The expectations others have of you are often never discussed, yet you are evaluated on those expectations. It’s not fair, but it’s true.

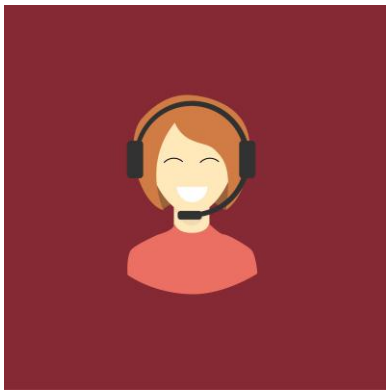


Here's why your boss cares. You are a representative of your boss' organization, and *others judge your boss* based on your behavior. For your customers you ARE the organization. So, your manager wants you to represent them in the best light possible to their external customers and clients, AND internal customers (like their boss).

### You will face two kinds of etiquette expectations:

- **Internal customers** who comprise the members of your own organization or team. Think about a time when you had an unexpected absence from work. Who on your team was affected? Those people are your internal customers.
- **External customers** who are looking to you for help. Everyone has experience as an external customer: a person who approaches an agent whom they hope will meet their need. Your "professionalism" will impact how happy your external customers are.

## The Basics



### Age and culture: Millennials, GenX'ers, and Boomers

Many students today are classified as being born in "the *millennial* generation" – born between 1982 and 2004. Some researchers claim that each generation has different values, norms, rituals, and work expectations. Although nobody perfectly fits a generational description, it can be helpful to use those categories to explore "professionalism." Your direct boss or upper manager will probably be a GenXer or Baby Boomer. This means that their expectations and values may be at odds with yours which makes it important for you to learn work culture expectations.

### Etiquette tips that can help you succeed

#### Be Available

The first way that you make your colleagues and customers feel valued is by acknowledging them promptly.

- When the phone rings, answer it before the third ring.
- When a customer or colleague enters your work area, you need to look up from your computer, stop whatever else you're doing as soon as possible and give them your attention.

**TIP:** *If you're in the middle of something you simply can't stop (such as a phone call), acknowledge them verbally, or with a nod and hand motion, and ask them politely to wait. Otherwise stop what you are doing and give them your attention.*

#### Be Welcoming

Greet the colleague or customer in a friendly, appropriate way. Make eye contact, smile, and say something like, "How is it going today?" Then stop, and let the person respond.

**TIP:** Your first opportunity to be a good listener is when you ask the “How May I help you?” question.

### Appear Helpful....

Appear eager to help, but not in such an aggressive way that the person is annoyed. Don't trail people around the premises or interrupt them every two minutes and ask them if you can help.

**TIP:** Ask your boss, colleagues, and customers if they need help. If they say they don't want help right away, let them know where you'll be available and leave them alone.

### ...Then Be Helpful

- Help the customer by directly addressing his or her request.
- Be helpful by actively listening. Show that you're listening by making eye contact, nodding, or even jotting down a note. Ask clarifying questions if necessary to get more details.

**TIP:** Do not interrupt when the other person is speaking—you can't listen when you're talking.

- Be helpful to internal and external customers by being knowledgeable about the services your group provides. Have you ever asked an employee something they should know only to be met with a blank stare? Learn your job and then some. Know your stuff - inside and out. Have a clear sense of the department's goals and functions and know where your work fits in. Try to get to the point where you never have to say, "I don't know, but so-and-so will be back at 3pm."

**TIP:** Also know the difference between being knowledgeable and showing off. Tell your customers what they need to know, not everything you know about it.

- Be helpful by knowing about other services at your organization that are linked with yours. Get to know the related workings of the organization so that, if the help your customer needs is not available in your department, you have a reasonable knowledge of where he or she can get it.

**TIP:** The help you give (or aren't able to give) can be a big influence on how the customer feels about customer service across campus.

## Be Positive

Be cheerful, courteous, and respectful throughout the interaction. Remain calm at all times, even when the customer or co-worker is rude.

**TIP:** *Leave your personal life at home. Your customers neither need nor want to know that you are having a bad day, that you are having relationship problems, that you are tired, or that you feel sick. Once you step into work, smile, and carry on.*

*If you believe that your ability to do your best work is compromised, then talk to your boss about what is going on so that the two of you can work it out.*

## Go the Extra Mile

Whatever the extra step may be, take it. For instance, if someone walks into your department and asks you where to find a specific office, don't just say, "It's on the north side of the building." Take the person there. Wait and see if he or she finds the office in question.

**TIP:** *They may not say so to you, but people notice when you make an extra effort. They may even tell your supervisor about it.*

## Deal with complaints

No one likes hearing complaints, and it's tempting to develop an attitude of, "You can't please all the people all the time." That may be true, but if you give the complaint your attention, you may be able to please this one person this one time and reap the benefits.

**TIP:** *If you or your department hears the same complaint over and over again, think about how it might be resolved and talk to your boss about it.*

## Be Reliable

Reliability is vital to good relationships, and good internal and external customer service is no exception. Don't make promises unless you will keep them. If you say, "I will have this ready for you on Tuesday," make sure it is ready on Tuesday. Otherwise, don't say it. The same rule applies to customer appointments, deadlines, etc.

**TIP:** *Think before you make a promise; nothing annoys people more than a broken promise.*

## Close appropriately

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" is always a good way to wrap up. End your interactions with others on a positive note: Thank them or wish them a good day.

## Employer suggestions for the student intern

There are many employer surveys that list suggestions to student interns and employees. The list is long so we made it easy for you by consolidating those suggestions below. Read through them and mark those that surprise you or make you curious. Then discuss those items you marked with your employer. It's a great way to understand professional etiquette from another's point of view.



**Never:**

1. Complain
2. Exclusively hang out with cliques your own age
3. Talk about previous jobs or procedures
4. Gossip about coworkers
5. Play with your phone or computer games
6. Do homework before asking if it's OK or if there are other projects

**Always:**

1. Do more than is expected – give your work that special touch or attention
2. Act interested in boring tasks so you completely understand and can do them
3. Remember names of co-workers
4. Prepare for meetings – have everything ready before you meet.
5. Thank people
6. Learn the business
7. Show up early sometimes
8. Leave late sometimes without being asked
9. Choose co-worker friends slowly. Sometimes the most friendly people are the most needy and unpopular at work.

**Ask your boss:**

1. What could I do to exceed your expectations?
2. What have past employees done that made your life much easier?
3. What tips would you pass along from the most successful employees who have had this job?
4. What is the worst thing I could do in this job that you want me to avoid?
5. Whom should I emulate?
6. Who is great in this role that I should learn from?
7. How can I best help you?
8. How can I become employee of the year?

**Your personal list:**

List any additional suggestions you have heard or know from past jobs

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

**A word about dress code.** You would be surprised by the stories employers tell about inappropriately dressed student workers...and that they are frustrated with it. Many students have never been coached on appropriate business attire. Often, students assume that the fashions they wear are perfectly fine since they are popular in public. However, you can actually embarrass supervisors by your fashion choices (you represent your boss to the public), and they may not tell you. Ask your boss to comment on your clothing, grooming, and appearance. Ask them to be specific. Your evaluation can hinge on problem areas such as being too casual, revealing, skin tight, colorful, tattoos, too formal, perfume/cologne, body odors, stale clothing, wrinkled clothes, etc. Now is the time to ask.