

BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

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There's one thing worse than being late for an appointment, it's being late for an appointment with an expert in business etiquette.

I'm sitting on the Dart going in to Pearse Station on my way to meet Pamela Fay, a consultant specialising in training Irish executives in the do's and don'ts of modern manners. She is part of a growing breed. It seems that there is a body of opinion out there that suggests that one side effect of the Celtic Tiger is that politeness and respect for others is being brushed aside in the pursuit of the next big deal.

Fay's own literature quotes research citing that as many as 40% of all adults experience some form of social anxiety, which can translate into bad social skills and a poor approach to other people.

And a joint study by Harvard University and the Stanford Research Institute in the US, says that technical skills and knowledge account for only 15% of getting, keeping and advancing in a job. The remaining 85% is connected to how we behave.

In truth a part of me is dreading this meeting. I imagine Ms Fay to be a sharp suited dominatrix just waiting to expose me as a social inadequate, an ill bred dullard who has only just found out how to use a chair.

As the train waits, I pick up a copy of Meet, Greet and Eat, The Impressive Way to Business and Social Etiquette by Irish author Margot Bellew.

My eyes are drawn to a paragraph on time keeping, "You should not only be on time for all appointments – arrive 15 minutes early". Bloody hell! Was I out of the room when they made that one up? I've gone from being five minutes late to twenty. If everyone worked to this schedule, time would lose all meaning. Very polite people would start turning up in the middle of the morning for a lunch appointment.

This is a minefield. And it sums up my unease about the current debate on good manners, that it 's a book of rules that only some people know about and which are used to judge the rest of us. My inner class warrior also sees etiquette as a way of keeping people in their place, a code used to identify interlopers, "She makes lots of money but did you see the way she held her tea cup?"

Following a frantic scarp from Pearse station I burst in to the elegant surroundings of the Merrion Hotel in central Dublin, sweating and panting like a dog that's been locked in the car all summer.

Despite not knowing if I'm a journalist from Cara magazine or an asthmatic sex pest, Pamela Fay greets me warmly. I note she doesn't point at her watch or lecture me on my lack of a tie before noon in a built up area. For a Madam of manners she seems quite laid back.

We spend the next hour challenging my hastily constructed prejudices.

"The word etiquette puts people off," says Fay, "we need to find a new term. What I am trying to do is help people in the new business situations we all find ourselves in".

Central to Fay's philosophy is that good manners are about putting other people at their ease.

"It's not about you," she says, managing to make that sound like a compliment (God, she's good). "We have all become so self obsessed that we forget that behaving with courtesy is about thinking of how best to help someone else."

One of the challenges for a modern business person is navigating their way through the what Fay describes as the legacy of 'Casual Friday', a merging of our work and social lives, the effect of which has been to create new uncertainties as to what is acceptable behaviour. What is it OK to wear at work now? Is mild swearing at work forbidden or is it a good ice-breaker? Can we use a laptop on a plane? (a number of leading companies based in Dublin have prohibited their staff from doing so).

And new technology has added a further layer of complexity to the regular list of P's and Q's that make up our daily lives. Top of the list for many of us is the mis-use of the mobile phone.

The constant pressure on us to be accessible means manners can take a backseat. The mobile has given us the option of discussing our private business in the public arena and many of us are happy to take advantage.

In a recent poll by US market research group Synovate, 68% of Americans claimed to observe poor cell phone etiquette at least once per day. The study noted that people showed the poorest etiquette when using the very devices they rely on the most (52% said they would "die" if their phones and e-mails were taken away).

One of the intriguing things about the debate on etiquette is whether rudeness is just a pain of modern life, or if it is emblematic of something more troubling? Lynne Truss, in her book *Talk to the Hand*, discusses whether the collapse of manners is a sign of a greater social immorality. Extended into a business context it's easy to see why she might have a point.

The most high profile corporate stories of the past two years, such as the collapse of Enron, the skulduggery within top consultants Arthur Andersen or the corruption at Worldcom, support this view.

And of the role models presented by the media, politeness is not high on the list of desirable attributes.

The stand out hit of the Autumn schedules in the UK and Ireland has been *The Apprentice*, with computer magnet Sir Alan Sugar in the role occupied by Donald Trump in the original US version of the show. Each week the contestants compete against each other to save their own necks and avoid being fired by Sir Alan. Chasing the prize of a £100,000 a year job at Amstrad, Sugar's firm, contestants lie, cheat, and generally do anything they can to be the last man or woman standing.

Thinking of others, good manners, selflessness are all seen as a weaknesses to be exploited.

Ansell, a charming and successful sales manager who made it through to the final four, was fired for being, in Sir Alan Sugar's opinion, 'too nice'. His pleasant demeanour and enviable people skills were a disadvantage. They gave the impression that he lacked an edge, the inner steel required to prosper in the modern business world.

The programme, says Fay, gives a misleading impression of what is required to be successful. "I'm always struck when I meet very successful people how nice they are," she says. "They are happy in their own skin and exude a calmness that is sometimes not the case in those striving to get to the top."

As we leave the Merrion Hotel, having paid the bill and taken great care to work out the exact tip, I'm left wondering whether Irish business life is becoming a version of The Apprentice, and if that trusty old cliché of the friendly Irishman is going to be replaced by something less appealing.

I seek guidance from executiveplanet.com, a website offering help to the global business traveller. Among the tips on Irish working practices I find this little gem on my own etiquette blind spot. "Understand that the Irish have more of a casual attitude toward time. In some cases, if you are late to a meeting, it will be overlooked".

That's what I love about national stereotypes, they can be so reassuring.

RECOGNISE YOURSELF? A guide to being rude at work

THE SELLING MACHINE

When working in a sales position, stand on a chair and sing 'We Are The Champions' whenever someone buys something from you. This will keep up team morale and endear you to non-sales staff who may share your office.

THE TOUCHER

Research shows that women love being touched by their male workmates, especially in stressful situations. For example, if you see a woman delivering financial results to a group of senior executives, reach over and offer your support with an affectionate pat on the backside followed by a knowing wink.

PHONE BORE

When on the mobile phone it is essential that every person in the room/train carriage/aeroplane quickly becomes familiar with the details of your personal life. Take your lead from Shakespearean actors who are trained to 'talk to the gods'. When trying to be funny, look around to gauge the admiring responses from people close by.

THE STAPLE KING

Be ruthless with your fellow workmates' quota of office stationery, and be sure to label everything of your own to avoid unpleasantness.

THE CREDIT TAKER

When in a managerial position try to attach yourself to every piece of good news entering your building, and protect those under you from unnecessary attention that might cause a drop in work flow.

THE STALKER

Take the remembering of names a stage further. Use your Microsoft Outlook to keep a file on colleagues and business associates, including highly personal information such as their partners' medical history. Surprise them with your depth of knowledge at business functions, they'll remember you for it.