

Professional Presence in a Casual World

An interview with...

Suzanne Updegraff

DAVID E. WRIGHT (WRIGHT)

Today we're talking with Suzanne Updegraff. There are so many instances in each of our careers where we throw away our success through unprofessional behavior. Knowing the right tools to employ to create a powerful image, understanding how to develop a model for leadership performance, and aligning your personal goals through organizational results is imperative to getting ahead in today's fast-paced global economy. With etiquette as the essential core ingredient for enhancing your professionalism, this chapter will provide tips and proven techniques for adapting your style with your organization's culture. You'll also discover how to align your professional competencies with the strategic vision of your firm by implementing a defined model of behavior.

Suzanne welcome to *GPS for Success: Goals and Proven Strategies*.

SUZANNE UPDEGRAFF (UPDEGRAFF)

Thank you, David.

WRIGHT

How has our casual society influenced professional behavior in organizations?

UPDEGRAFF

Today's global business climate is much more casual in practice, and there are three broad dimensions affecting professional behavior in organizations.

The primary noticeable difference is seen in our professional dress and overall appearance. In the past, the corporate uniform was more defined and easier to identify. Changes in societal and global trends dictate a more relaxed manner of working, and this method of behaving corresponds to how individuals are dressing.

Human Resource professionals are often interested in how to redirect an employee's inappropriate clothing or appearance. When I review their policy manual, it's discouraging to note that descriptive language regarding business-appropriate attire is almost non-existent or lacks specific meaning for an employee. Business casual attire is often the directive for employees and managers, and the interpretation is misunderstood and vague.

Dress, hygiene, and appearance are important elements that help define one's professional image and should not be minimized. Individuals are often promoted and/or overlooked for a promising position based upon clothing decisions, hairstyles, and attention to grooming.

The second dimension involves our casual approach to business relationships. Employees often find themselves revealing too many intimate details about their lives and are much more familiar with peers and management today. Because of this trend, more personal data is shared at work.

It's not uncommon to learn details about co-workers on social networking sites, and the societal fabric of what data to share in a business setting has changed due to technology. We're not quite sure of what is appropriate to reveal when chatting with internal clients, and we're often unaware of how too much information about our personal lives can damage our professional reputations.

The third piece of how our casual society has influenced professional behavior is in the basic communication skills we employ. Technology has affected this dimension, but it's much more complex than cell phone usage or texting versus writing someone a business letter. We're much more casual in how we speak and the language we use. It's not uncommon to hear slang references, even when speaking with senior management or clients.

WRIGHT

Do generational differences influence professional behavior and what is the effect on professional etiquette?

UPDEGRAFF

Each generation brings its own unique communication and behavioral style when individuals enter the professional workforce. Technology punctuates generational differences and unfortunately, Generation Y (individuals born between 1979–2000) is often labeled as unprofessional because of misuse of electronic communication. Using technology in a corporate meeting while your manager is speaking is unprofessional because you aren't listening. Unfortunately, we tend to blame the technology, but the obvious offense is not paying attention to what is being discussed.

Another example of how the different generational issues influence professional behavior is in our understanding of working hours and a daily structure. A sophisticated, technological, global society dictates a different, more flexible flow for accomplishing tasks. Different generations embrace this more relaxed method in various ways and interpret one method as more professional than another. At the end of the day, business is about results; how those results are achieved is often viewed as either professional or not.

Understanding and having a strong knowledge base about what each generation might need in arriving at business solutions is important and involves competent communication skills.

WRIGHT

The word “etiquette” implies a less modern approach to conducting business. How will understanding and utilizing the correct use of etiquette help me in my career?

UPDEGRAFF

Wikipedia defines “etiquette” as a particular conduct or procedure defined by standards of measurement established in a particular culture. Etiquette is practiced by all of us each day, but can be misused when we lack adequate knowledge about how to employ the standard correctly.

Your performance during a business meeting can define your understanding or lack of understanding about meeting protocol. Accepted standards of conduct are part of the code that's referenced in the above definition. These standards might include not interrupting while others are speaking or knowing when to disagree with a client or executive. Becoming more sophisticated and polished in your etiquette during meetings will help define you as a more professional person.

Etiquette knowledge can enhance your career because you stand out as someone who knows how to behave appropriately.

Knowing the correct way to introduce one individual to another is a necessary skill that can be learned and will be useful in your business career. Proper etiquette gives you confidence and you appear more professionally competent.

WRIGHT

What are the obstacles to practicing and utilizing professional etiquette day-to-day in business?

UPDEGRAFF

One obstacle is lack of knowledge. We simply aren't aware of etiquette rules and are confused about the correct way to behave in certain situations. Our fast-paced society has presented obstacles with regard to polite interaction. We're multitasking while engaging with other individuals hundreds of times a day. This increases our stress levels; when your stress levels go up, the amount of polite ways of speaking and listening decrease.

Another obstacle to using proper etiquette is our long-term familiarity with colleagues and clients. Many individuals work for long periods of time within organizations, and the feeling of family is heightened when this occurs. Displaying behaviors that are normally reserved for your home and relatives is not uncommon. We begin to loosen up, we share information and intimacies, and we say and do things we would normally reserve for our more private relationships.

In today's casual world, many individuals aren't exposed to the proper way of doing things. We take a "fast-food" approach to behavior, communication, dining, and interacting and the message is one of apathy, ignorance, and unconcern.

WRIGHT

Would it be proper etiquette for me to ask how someone would like to be addressed and communicated with?

UPDEGRAFF

Absolutely. Respecting another person's preferred mode of communication is always a professional choice. Additionally, I've worked with clients who complain that their managers or peers have given them a nickname they didn't want. This is an example of an unprofessional habit.

WRIGHT

Will you provide for our readers an example of how an individual has used professionalism and expert etiquette to advance in his or her career or to even become more successful?

UPDEGRAFF

There is an old saying, "dress for the job you want, not the job you have." The same applies to communication, behavior, and etiquette understanding. If my intention were to advance in my career, I would immediately notice how senior management communicates and behaves. I might find a role model or mentor inside the organization who is considered a top-notch professional. Changing noticeable aspects of your performance can help you advance in your career.

I often share a simple story about one client who ate lunch at his desk each day. His manager viewed him as a less sophisticated professional because he didn't appear to have a work or refreshment balance. There was the additional problem of food smells surrounding his desk consistently. When my client began leaving the building for lunch and stopped eating at his desk, he gained a more professional appearance and image. Executives rarely eat at their desks, and when they do practice this, they normally have their own office and can dine in private.

Meeting deadlines, improving your posture, eliminating the slang references from your speech, and removing sarcastic remarks from your daily banter are all small examples of behaviors that will help advance your career.