

ISSUES

# Courtesy calling

**W**HILE MANY ASPECTS of the corporate world have undergone a change of late, when it comes to corporate etiquette, the rules remain as inflexible as ever. **Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary** revisits this territory and finds there can be no substitute for good manners and respect for different cultures.

You might not have caught onto it as yet, but each time you start your work day, you are getting ready to negotiate yet another learning curve in one of the most undervalued skills of job performance - corporate etiquette.

### Imagine these situations

■ You receive a call from a client who, mid-conversation, launches into a full-fledged assault on you, your company and your work. He/she screams at you as you try to keep a steady voice. Raising your voice is not an option because it is not professional, but drowning under the tidal wave of exaggerated criticism is not an option either. What do you do?  
■ You are upset about the manner in which your boss has dealt with you regarding a certain important issue. How will you communicate your displeasure to your boss?  
These are but two of the most common workplace issues many of us

face routinely. But are we equipped to handle them properly?

There are many other areas, each equally vexing or disturbing. From personal expectations, cordiality, personal hygiene to office protocol or even basic courtesy, situations at the workplace can put to test an individual's most basic values. Sometimes instincts guide us to respond in an appropriate way but most of the time we are poorly equipped to respond correctly and bring the situation under control.

Which is not to say that lack of responsiveness is a rampancy that must go unchecked. For every boss who mishandles a situation there is a way for the subordinate to redress his/her grievances. For every irate client who throws courtesy out of the window, there is a recipient of that anger who knows how to leverage it to buy reason. Much of this kind of skill comes from specialised training

and the rest can be mined from one's common sense. US administrator and lawyer Clarence Thomas expressed it best: "Good manners will open doors that best education cannot." Call it good manners or corporate etiquette, the issue remains pivotal to our lives considering we spend more than 50 per cent of our time at the workplace and the manner in which we conduct ourselves largely determines the direction of our careers.

### A matter of sophistication

"Corporate etiquette is about being able to present yourself with refinement and polish that shows you can be trusted and taken seriously," says Gisou Meherbenzad, a trainer at Finishing Touch, Dubai's first academy of its kind which is fully dedicated to international etiquette and protocol. The academy opened its doors in 2007 in Dubai Knowledge Village. The importance of mastering

corporate etiquette, says Meherbenzad, is a given and the sooner we realise it the better. In the UAE the issue becomes even more vital due to the sheer diversity of people at the workplace. With more than 180 nationalities living and working here, knowing how to conduct yourself is both a challenge and an achievement.

"Etiquette is the science of good living and makes an important statement about your business philosophy and conduct no other mission statement can," Meherbenzad says. The birth of this science lies in the understanding, respect and knowledge of our cultural differences and values. Ignorance or presumption about another culture is a deal-breaker.

### Body language conveys a powerful message

"I will pay more for the ability to get along with people than any other

ability," said American oil magnate John Rockefeller. Appropriate behaviour and mannerisms help build relationships and distinguish a company in the face of competition. While the more obvious aspects like proper attire, comportment, good values, emotional equilibrium, professional and social interactions are the big building blocks. The cement that keeps them together is made of finer stuff - body language.

"You must not forget that you are communicating even when you are not speaking," says Meherbenzad. "Body language sends across a powerful message to the person who is dealing with you. It is the most eloquent of the forms of silent communication. It is

non-verbal communication and people listen to that more than spoken words. Slouching, playing with your hair, tapping fingers on the table or folding your arms around the chest are postures that can send out wrong signals to people," says Meherbenzad. If you try to have proper posture, direct eye contact, a smile, a firm handshake, which are key elements of body language, it can go a long way in projecting a very positive self-image that opens doors.

Meherbenzad lists some important situations and suggests the correct way to deal with them.

### Situation 1

A client calls and begins to rant. You are sitting in an open-plan office and it's hard to fight the stress that's building up in you. How do you handle the situation



**Gisou Meherbenzad** says corporate etiquette shows you can be trusted

**Steer clear of gossip.** You could try explaining to colleagues that you're not comfortable gossiping

