

Mind your manners

Etiquette experts are trying to restore civility at the office in an era marked by casual dress, terse e-mails and leaner, meaner operations

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Danièle Parent didn't know what to expect when she recently took her etiquette training to a South Shore high school.

The school population included teenagers sporting blue hair, facial piercings and midriff-revealing clothes.

Parent walked into a classroom and was stunned when none of the students stood up to greet her arrival. So she told the students she'd leave the room and return, expecting them to stand upon her entrance. They did. Then she shook hands with several and chided them if their grip was weak.

In a short time, she had a captivated audience, teens who let her know how desperately they wanted to learn how to "behave properly."

Training adolescents is a new gig for Parent, who has been working as a workplace etiquette consultant for the past two years. And it bodes well for the future workforce if she can get her message to enough youths.

The author of *Leçons de Charme* (Libre Expression, 2003) and a former host on French-language radio and television, Parent believes standards of comportment have slipped dramatically in the workplace in recent years.

"Everywhere, people need to be brought back to using good manners," she said. "I teach etiquette in companies and to individuals. Many people think using etiquette is snobbery. It's not. There's a common-sense reason for every piece of etiquette."

Parent, a product of nun-run boarding schools, says she got steeped in continental manners at the beginning of her marriage, when she and her husband lived in Paris for a couple of years. "I learned how Europeans dine, how to talk properly, how to behave at parties and dinner," she said.



"Baby boomers in companies call me about their younger associates," says etiquette consultant Danièle Parent, a former radio and TV host and author of *Leçons de Charme*. "They say their poor manners are losing them clients."

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Five years ago, she launched a business in which she organized cooking-and-dining-for-business events. "Instead of entertaining their clients in restaurants, businesspeople would choose a menu and come to a cooking school, where they would cook a meal with their clients and everyone would eat together.

"I had a shock when I saw how these executives ate. They would drink too much, speak loudly, didn't know how to sit properly, couldn't use their cutlery and didn't know how to hold their wine glasses."

She decided to create an etiquette consultancy after attending a black-tie ball a few years ago and noticed to her horror "big corporate presidents with napkins tucked into their shirt collars" and some walking around without their jackets.

"I realized I had my work cut out for me," Parent said.

These days, companies ask Parent to coach their executives in good manners - everything from corporate dining to cell-phone and e-mail use.

"I deal with a lot of young men," she said. "Baby boomers in companies call me about their younger associates. They say their poor manners are losing them clients. These are educated people who are well-dressed and bill as much as \$300 an hour but they lack manners."

She observes and coaches her clients on their physical appearance, networking abilities, dining and hand shakes, among other skills. "I explain that to get a client these days, you have to secure him with the right impression," she said. "I tell them that if they want to keep a client, they'll have to wear white gloves up to here. You have to be extraordinary."

Parent is not alone in seeing what needs to be corrected in our leaner, meaner workplaces. The ethos that has spawned e-mails that are so terse, they're downright rude, has spawned a cadre of etiquette experts who are trying to restore civility at work.

The McGill Executive Institute will offer a seminar in May on business etiquette that includes a corporate dining component.

"A couple of things have led us to offer this," said Dora Koop, director of program development and marketing at the Institute, which offers training for people in the workplace. "The use of e-mail, in which people communicate in ways that they wouldn't if they were face-to-face, is one reason we think this program is necessary."

If the workplace is less civil than it was, says Koop, one reason is the changes that have swept organizations.

"Boundaries have changed because organizations are flatter, less hierarchical," she said. "People at different levels are communicating with people they wouldn't otherwise have communicated with. And there's more diversity."

With the advent of business casual, dress codes are more ambiguous, and this leads to confusion, she said.

New technology, such as e-mail, has also created new rules people haven't internalized.

Loretta Di Vita, a specialist in professional development and contemporary business protocol with Decorum Consultation Inc., will teach the McGill workshop.

"When I train businesspeople, we don't just call it etiquette," she said. "We talk about leadership, diplomacy and ethics. We're seeing a lot of corporate giants (Enron et al) being assessed. Cavalier behaviour isn't accepted anymore. People are tired of the incivility."

Di Vita says much of the blame for declining behavioural mores at work lies in the mixed message the corporate milieu promulgates.

"We've been taught to compete at any cost. Yet we spend big dollars on team building," she said. "When you work in that 'succeed at any cost' mode, you start forgetting about behaviour with peers."

The speed of work has also aided the deterioration, she said. "The pace is so fast, it leaves us less time to make those considerations we call good manners."

Neil Gerlach, a professor of sociology at Carleton University, says workplace comportment reflects a larger social reality.

"It reflects changing notions of what constitutes a civil society," he said. "Studies of this have focused on the past 200 years and what researchers have discovered is that the breakdown in standards of etiquette and ethics occurs during periods of large social change as we're experiencing right now."

"The nature of the family is changing, and that's where we first learn manners."

Gerlach says that as organizations have become less hierarchical "there's less bureaucratic oversight to hold employees to certain kinds of behaviour. There's more expectation of individual responsibility."

Moreover, he added, an increasingly heterogeneous workplace, compared with its counterpart of 50 years ago, means there's a mixture of social values at work. "People are coming into the workplace after being socialized in diverse ways," he said.

If Danièle Parent has her way, many of the young people she's coaching in schools now will be trained in workplace etiquette long before they arrive on the job.

Last week, she coached students at Académie Laurentienne in Val Morin in such skills as how to set tables and dine. The school's principal, Pierre Filiatrault, echoes what Parent says about the youths she coaches.

"They like this a lot. They want to learn it," he says. "Our intention is not to create snobs. It's to create people who are polite. This is the best way you can prepare people for the workplace."

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