

# The Advisor

Resources for Supervisors, Managers, and Human Resources Personnel

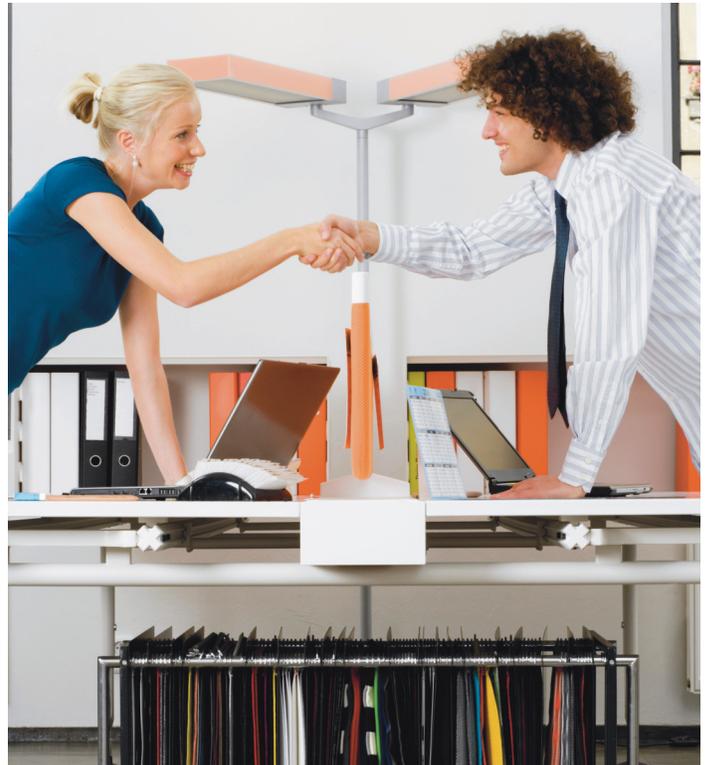
## Civil Behavior: A Workplace Guide

The old adage — “treat others as you would like to be treated” — are words many of us try to live by. Yet in the hectic, deadline-driven atmosphere that is today’s workplace, sometimes the “Golden Rule” gets lost in the shuffle.

While an occasional lapse in politeness is excusable, a generally lax attitude toward manners within the workplace may have a toxic effect. The average employed person spends approximately one-third of her or his time on the job, usually with the same group of co-workers. Over time, petty annoyances and small grievances related to shared workspaces and common area etiquette may begin to accumulate, resulting in tension, irritation, and mistrust. These feelings may impact both productivity and morale and could result in behaviors that affect the entire workplace, such as:

- Angry outbursts or blow-ups between co-workers
- Bullying
- Gossip
- Backstabbing
- Passive-aggressive behavior

When it comes to workplace etiquette, managers are often put in an uncomfortable position. Few people in supervisory roles enjoy playing referee between team members squabbling over refrigerator space or maintenance of shared files. While “find a way to get along” may be the order of the day in many workplaces, it is often helpful to take a more direct approach in preventing these issues from becoming a distraction.



A good first step in avoiding these situations is to establish an expectation of courteous behavior between team members and hold employees accountable when lapses occur. However, it is important to keep in mind that people of varying ages and from differing backgrounds may have vastly divergent ideas about what is and is not permissible within the workplace. Therefore, establishing ground rules for appropriate behavior within shared spaces may help to create a more harmonious environment. While some of these may be established by office protocol, others may be at the discretion of individual team managers. Some areas you may want to consider addressing before conflict arises include:

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- **Noise and music.** Whether your employees are in traditional offices, a cubicle area, or a shop floor, noise can be a significant distraction when people are trying to work. Encourage employees to keep their voices at a reasonable level when conversing with others or when on the phone. If you allow staff members to listen to music in their work areas, ask that they keep the volume at a level that is not distracting to others or that they use headphones.
- **Kitchen and lunchroom areas.** Common complaints related to kitchen use include:
  - Hogging of refrigerator space
  - An employee's food (labeled or unlabeled) being taken by another
  - Abandoned food decomposing in a common refrigerator
  - Leaving a mess in the microwave
  - Dirty dishes being left in the sink
  - Not cleaning up the lunch table after finishing a meal

To avoid conflicts over these sorts of issues, it may help to post a list of kitchen rules that everyone is expected to follow. In addition, assigning kitchen or refrigerator clean-up duty to team members on a rotating basis may encourage everyone to be on their best behavior where these areas are concerned.

- **Work areas.** It is important for team members to respect each other's work

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areas. Remind staff that it is polite to knock or ask permission before coming into someone else's private workspace. If two employees share a work area, encourage them to find ways to keep from interfering with each other's personal space. Should disagreements arise, meet with the employees and try to establish ground rules for handling their shared space. (See "How Do I Say That" for suggestions on addressing these sorts of concerns.)

- **Meetings.** Establishing a good tone for meetings will help keep them on track and make them a productive use of time. Emphasize the importance of punctuality and of concluding meetings on time, both for productivity reasons and as a courtesy to fellow co-workers. Encourage people to stay focused on the topic at hand and only include those who actually need to attend. If you notice friction between co-workers during a meeting, address it privately.
- **Organization.** People have differing

styles, and sometimes these will clash at work. Some people may prefer to be neat and organized, while others may have a more haphazard approach to accomplishing tasks. Establish clear expectations for the “spit and polish” of finished products while allowing employees the freedom to apply their personal style to how they accomplish their work. If two employees are clashing over organization issues, try to establish a middle ground that balances the need for order with the desire for creativity.

- **Communication.** Communication issues can be one of the biggest stumbling blocks to collaboration and teamwork. When conflicts arise because of differing communication styles, encourage your team members to

listen to each other without interruption. Other ways to encourage good communication include:

- Avoiding jumping to conclusions
  - Asking open-ended questions that will increase opportunities for discussion
  - Using language that demonstrates respect while avoiding negative or derogatory terms
  - Giving co-workers full attention when they are speaking
- **Cliques.** In some instances, small sub-groups may form within your team, either as a result of work friendships

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## *How Do I Say That*

When two employees are having difficulty getting along, it is important to address the situation. Here are some suggestions for handling the conflict:

- **Consult with Human Resources.** Review any relevant policies and disciplinary procedures.
- **Schedule a separate private meeting with each employee.** Outline your concerns about the situation and the impact it is having on the team. Suggested communication: *“When you have disputes with your co-worker, it affects team morale. Others are uncomfortable with the way you are behaving toward each other.”*
- **Listen.** Ask each employee to explain what is causing the friction. Encourage the employee to describe the events objectively without assigning blame.
- **Ask what the employee can do to change the situation.** Have the employee focus on his or her behavior, not that of the other person. Suggested communication: *“What can you do differently so that these conflicts stop cropping up?”*
- **Follow up.** Schedule a meeting at a later date to review the situation and any improvements in behavior. Failure to follow up is the number one reason employees don’t take a manager’s concerns seriously. If further conflicts arise, consult with Human Resources.



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or because groups of employees share a work area or common tasks. While there is nothing wrong with friendships within your team, be mindful of the impact they may have on team dynamics. If you feel that a small group is wielding too much influence or ostracizing other team members, address the situation promptly.

As a leader, perhaps the most important thing you can do to ensure civil behavior in your workplace is to lead by example. You cannot expect that your employees will be “one big happy family” or that everyone will always get along. However, your example can demonstrate the importance of being compassionate and tolerant toward fellow co-workers. Show courtesy to all employees by saying “please” and “thank you” and by always following office etiquette and rules for

common areas. Express appropriate concern when an employee is ill or has experienced a loss, such as the death of a loved one. Finally, encourage your staff to treat each other as they would wish to be treated and to work together as a team to make your workplace a pleasant place to spend time.

The following books offer more ideas on setting guidelines for civil behavior at work:

“Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct” by P.M. Forni, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003

“Professional Civility: Communicative Virtue at Work” by Janie M. Harden Fritz, Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2012

“The Etiquette Edge: The Unspoken Rules for Business Success” by Beverly Langford, AMACOM, 2005

“When the Little Things Count...And They Always Count” by Barbara Pachter, Da Capo Press, 2006

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