

Feature article

Etiquette and good manners



Weelan HO, Principal of PGA Consulting Limited and, Director of Ascent Global Service Pty Ltd (Australia). For more information, visit www.ascent-global-services.com, www.pgaconsulting.com

Perceptions and reflections

Good manners and etiquette have always been important. People who show good manners and appropriate etiquette will influence others to do all they can for them, including in their business and career.

Years ago, my sisters complained that I talked too loudly and behaved too much like a “Hongkie”. “Hongkie” was a term we made up to describe our perception of the characteristics of some Hong Kong people who are loud, crude and rude with no manners. I was rather offended as I didn’t think the volume of my voice was high and certainly didn’t feel that I was crude and rude with no manners. It was not until I was just about to fight for a seat in the MTR that I realized that common sense etiquette and good manners we were taught can easily slip from our mind. Common sense is not so “common” after all. The external environment, be it positive or negative, can influence our behaviour. But being aware of it is a good start as we can decide whether to make an improvement.

Observe, learn and don’t make the same mistakes!

Some common practices that can be seen in public arena include:

Talking loudly on the phone with no consideration for others. Each of us has an invisible personal space we are comfortable with. When we talk loudly in public, we are infringing or invading other people’s personal space and thus taking away their freedom to have quieter moments. We are being disrespectful of others. Therefore if we really must talk on the phone in the public, it is best that we lower our voice, stop yelling and use our hand to cover our mouth. This definitely reduces the volume of our conversation.

Sitting with legs wide apart when wearing skirt or in trousers. We are not exhibitionists and it is best to keep the colours of our underwear to ourselves when wearing skirts!! Sitting with legs wide apart even if we are in trousers probably does not physically hurt anyone but it just does not come across well visually. We all want to present the best in us.

Eating, munching and chewing loudly, slurping and burping. In normal circumstances and in many cultures, these are considered bad eating habits. However many people are unaware that they engage in these behaviours because they have been doing it since they were young. In fact psychologically, they may feel the food is less flavoursome if they don't eat with gusto, making all the right noises. We can adjust our behaviours according to the respective culture. I was told, for example, that in Japan slurping when eating noodles is acceptable as it is a way to show how delicious the noodles are. So, one can slurp to one's satisfaction / content when eating noodles in Japan – but it is best to cut the slurping out when eating in a western restaurant. The slurping only draws unwanted attention to us.

Some people may argue that burping is a medical condition that one cannot avoid. In that case, do at least cover your mouth and say “excuse me”.

My sister once told me a little boy's rhyme on burping - “Pardon me for being so rude. It was not me, it was my food. It came upstairs to say hello and now has just gone down below.” In his own way, that little boy of three set an example of good manners.

Throwing rubbish around and not being civic minded. One thing SARS taught us is not to dirty our environment or create opportunities for bacteria to grow. Having the civic sense to not litter helps create a better living environment and we must be consistent in practicing this habit. I have been told of some people practising this habit when they are in their own country for fear of being fined as it is illegal to litter. But they will throw litter out of car windows into the streets while driving when they are in other countries where there are no such similar laws. They might not have violated the law but they certainly have disgraced themselves and are bad role models.

Common sense approach

Looking around and learning from other people's mistakes or strengths is one way to develop ourselves. We sometimes get into awkward situations whereby we don't know how we should behave or conduct ourselves. In that case, do as the Romans do – observe, see how local people behave (do things) and follow. A good example is standing on the escalator: whether you should stand on the right side or the left side varies according to the country you are in. Be sensitive enough, observe and do as how the local people do. If in doubt, ASK!!