

Top Image Experts Share What to Know to Advance Your Career

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Civility

A Solid Foundation for Your Image

By Yasmin Anderson-Smith, MCRP, AICI FLC

Treat your package the way you want to be treated.” I was amazed to hear this profound statement made by a Post Office employee in reply to a customer’s question about whether a small box was suitably wrapped for mailing abroad. There was no sarcasm in his reply, only sincerity and a certain pride as he expertly examined the package. Noting that it was secured with hospital tape, he explained that because the packaging was not secure, the box might not reach its international destination intact. The customer accepted his instructions with grace. The employee’s behavior and communication reflected the true spirit of civility by demonstrating care, concern and thoughtfulness. His brief relationship with the customer was positive, productive, and smooth.

Civility Defined

Exactly what is civility? Is it important or relevant for your business image or personal brand? Civility involves how we treat others, whether we are polite and courteous. Stephen Carter’s book, *Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy* (Harper Perennial Press, 1998) states that civility “. . . suggests an approach to life . . . a way of carrying one’s self and relating to others.” The word civility is rooted in the Latin word, *civitas*, meaning city, and *civilité*, which is a French word typically meaning politeness. *Civilité* also shares a common linguistic root with the words city and civilization for

“member of household.” This suggests that acting with civility means recognizing that one is part of a society, company, organization, community or household. The word civility involves caring about others, being concerned for their well-being, and having a sense of community, neighborly good will, and citizenship. Civility is behavior guided by rules of conduct.

Civility embraces ethics, character, attitude, esthetics and giving. Workplace attire and body language, branding, marketing, advertising, public relations, verbal, print and electronic communications are all ways in which we relate to each other. The receptionist who maintains her composure with a hostile customer, the client who brings all the necessary documents to a scheduled meeting, or the manager who observes and respects the dining etiquette of her international clients at a business luncheon, are all examples of civility in action.

Dr. P.M. Forni proposes a new way of looking at civility in his book *Choosing Civility—The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* (St. Martin’s Press, 2002). Regardless of whether we are in sync with the persons with whom we have relationships, being civil means considering and respecting their feelings, which might require our personal sacrifice, expressed through self-restraint. Dr. Forni says, “Life is what our relationships make it.”

Civility is a useful tool to help improve the quality of everyday relationships in business. If we are to have harmonious interactions with our colleagues, clients and customers, our behavior must be guided by certain standards of decency. The three “R” principles—Respect, Responsibility and Restraint—are key to civility and are central to the way we relate to each other. If we want to have positive relationships, applying the three Rs is an important first step. For example, your clients would certainly rather hear a voice message saying that you are on vacation with your expected return date than be puzzled about why you have not returned their phone calls.

Why Focus on Civility?

Everyone, regardless of age, creed or position on a company's organizational chart can apply the three "R" principles in their relationships with others. The rules outlined in Dr. Forni's book serve as a set of tools to shape the outcome of our business and personal interactions. Showing respect for a client's time, acknowledging when our performance fails to meet expectations, observing company rules and policies, and giving credit to a colleague for a job well done are important. These acts of civility enhance and elevate our personal and professional image and help build strong relationships. Productive hours are lost in the workplace when employees are either absent or underperforming because of stressful or negative relationships with colleagues or management. Anger, frustration, or mean-spiritedness are unproductive and could even promote ill health.

Let's Be Civil

Rudeness and inconsiderate acts flourish every day, everywhere. Incivility rears its ugly head to create unpleasant or unacceptable situations with acts that intrude upon our lives as we travel on airplanes, roads and trains, or sit in boardrooms and classrooms. Failing to acknowledge a co-worker, shifting blame, giving destructive criticism, or indulging in gossip are common incivilities in today's business environments. Unwillingly, we have learned to go along with these unacceptable behaviors even though they may impair relationships, or limit our potential growth or that of a co-worker. The following questions can serve as a quick test of where you are on the civility scale:

The Civility Challenge Quiz

1. Do you ever type on the computer while talking with your clients or colleagues?
2. Have you ever cut someone off in traffic?
3. Have you ever taken credit for someone else's work?

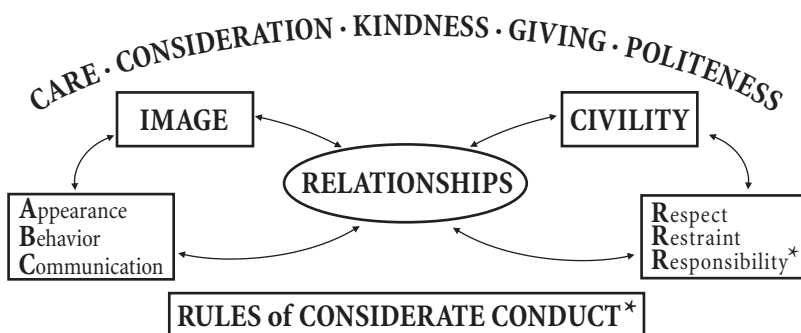
4. Do you ever talk or text on your cell phone during meetings?
5. Have you ever been impolite to a service employee in a restaurant?
6. Have you ever failed to acknowledge a colleague?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, I encourage you to focus on embracing civility in your professional behavior and communication. If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you may be civility-challenged. Your career could be suffering from a lack of civility and you may not even be aware of it.

The good news is that the three “R” principles provide a prescription for transforming lives positively, and can change negative behaviors, creating better relationships in both personal and professional settings.

The model below shows the interrelationships between each of the three “R” principles and the ABCs of image. Relationships are at the center of the model because they are central to business and to life. The rules of considerate conduct at the base of the model are directly related to image and civility. Considerate acts of kindness, giving, caring, taking care of your appearance, being a good guest and respecting others’ space and time elevate and enhance your personal and professional image. Showing up to a business reception in tattered blue jeans or a strapless dress shows disregard for the hosts, the other guests and the venue owners. Project a more confident image by paying attention to the written or unwritten business rules of attire.

The Image and Civility Model



*Appears in *Choosing Civility—The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* by P.M. Forni

The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct*

1. Pay attention
2. Acknowledge others
3. Think the best
4. Listen
5. Be inclusive
6. Speak kindly
7. Don't speak ill
8. Accept and give praise
9. Respect even a subtle "no"
10. Respect others' opinions
11. Mind your body
12. Be agreeable
13. Keep it down
(and rediscover silence)
14. Respect others' time
15. Respect others' space
16. Apologize earnestly
17. Assert yourself
18. Avoid personal questions
19. Care for your guests
20. Be a considerate guest
21. Think twice before asking
for favors
22. Refrain from idle complaints
23. Accept and give constructive
criticism
24. Respect the environment and
be gentle to animals
25. Don't shift blame and
responsibility

* *Choosing Civility—The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* by Dr. P.M. Forñi (St. Martin's Press, 2002)

Ethics and Integrity—The Heart of Civility

What is ethics, and what are its implications for your career? Civility embraces ethics. By providing helpful instructions to ensure that the customer's package would reach its destination on-time and intact, the Post Office employee mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter acted ethically by following the rules and doing the right thing. His actions were also in accord with the *Standards of Ethical Conduct for Post Office Employees*:

“ . . . employees are expected to become familiar with the laws and regulations applicable to their duties and to use their best efforts to comply. . . with all laws, rules and regulations applicable to the U.S. Postal Service's business.”

A code of ethics is simply a system or collection of rules or standards that govern conduct in business. In the book, *Ethics 4 Everyone—The Handbook for Integrity-Based Business Practices* (The Walk the Talk Company, 2002), the authors Eric Harvey and Scott Airitam point out that all ethical decisions begin with the individual. The choices you make determine your standard of ethics and the ultimate effect of your company's codes of conduct.

Ethics scandals are in evidence all over the world. Unethical conduct may include accepting exorbitant gifts from business interests who seek special favors in return, plagiarism, or failing to disclose a financial connection that could compromise your professional judgment. Harvey and Airitam note, however, that most of the time, people are fair, honest and abide by the rules. However, an occasional misstep in judgment can be a disaster for one's reputation or career, given the image- and brand-driven focus of today's global business environment, and the prevalence of the Internet. A good example is Eliot Spitzer, former Governor of New York, whose alleged misdeeds forced him to step down from his office in disgrace.

Observance of the code of ethics is a key factor in employee performance evaluations and in maintaining a high standard of professionalism. Whether or not there is a code of ethics in your company or organization, ethical behavior is a measure of your personal and professional integrity and is of paramount importance to your success.

Knowing the Rules and Regulations

Before you can make a decision to act ethically, you must first know the relevant rules and regulations. I always stress to my clients that ignorance is no excuse for breaking the rules. Although we all have a basic sense of right and wrong that has been instilled since childhood, everyone should learn the culture of the company or organization in which they work. It is harder to be derailed by unethical conduct if

your business decisions are guided by rules, laws and procedures. Trust, honesty, responsibility and respect are values that many businesses embrace.

Ethical decision-making must also be guided by doing the right thing, which is infinitely harder than not. We may observe a colleague misrepresenting his or her credentials to a client or seeking a special favor from a vendor for a family member—and yet we fail to take action. Since ethical dilemmas stem most often from issues that are not black-and-white, this poses challenges for employees and business owners.

How do we know what to do when faced with a potential ethics issue? Our stress-filled business world is influenced by peer pressure and the desire for quick success; it is so easy to abandon ethical conduct in favor of personal gain.

Complete the following checklist of questions before you make a decision about an ethical challenge. This could be the acid test that saves your reputation or career. The questions are adapted from *Ethics 4 Everyone—The Handbook for Integrity-Based Business Practices* by Harvey and Airtram, described on the previous page.

The Ethics Action Quiz

1. Is it consistent with the rules, laws and procedures?
2. Is it consistent with personal and organizational values?
3. Will it create a guilty conscience in me if I do it?
4. Is it consistent with stated commitments and guarantees?
5. Does it pass the “sniff” test?
6. Would the most ethical person I know take this action?

If your response to one or more questions was no, you may want to revisit the code of ethics or seek appropriate guidance.

As with civility, ethics in business is all about the three “R”s. The key to business success is learning and practicing these principles and following the rules, procedures, and your internal value system.

Civility, image and ethics go hand-in-hand. There is no better executive image you could strive for than becoming known by your clients and colleagues as always civil and ethical, that you can be taken at your word and respected for your actions.



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A graduate of the London Image Institute, Yasmin frequently presents on image, etiquette, civility and personal branding in local and international settings. Currently, Yasmin chairs the Civility Project committee for the Association of Image Consultants International, and serves as etiquette and civility editor of *Image Update*, the magazine published by AICI. Yasmin's leadership and expertise underlie her commitment to enrich, elevate, encourage, empower and inspire all her clients.

“Executive Image Power is the key resource for always making a great impression, feeling confident and getting the results you want. Your image matters when networking and building relationships. This book has hundreds of great ideas and insights and is a ‘must read’ for every career-minded professional.”

—Jill Lublin, Author of *Get Noticed-Get Referrals*, *Networking Magic*, and *Guerilla Publicity*

Your executive or professional image is the message you send out to your clients, potential clients and colleagues every time you walk in a room, attend a meeting or talk on the phone. Rev up your executive image power now by implementing the easy tips and techniques recommended by top image experts who have joined together to give you their most powerful career-building strategies.

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\$24.00 US, \$30.00 Canadian

