Politeness: A Management Strategy or the Basis of Virtue?

Manners Maketh the Manager

Organizations hold endless seminars that include modules on behavior, but progress is slow, as recent reports indicate. As Alison Maitland wrote in the *Financial Times*: "Rudeness at the office hits morale and productivity, but it is often perpetrated by those at the top." [1]

Rudeness at the office is nothing new and is perpetrated as often by top managers as the organization's rank and file. Offensive or disrespectful behavior by managers will dishearten staff, undermine their confidence and their ability to contribute to the firm.

But as Aristotle said, "Virtue has to start somewhere. As far as we know, there is no inherited gene for politeness." So we must learn it by doing it. In the same vein, Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, said that we can become virtuous by imitating virtue. According to Kant, "For when men play these roles, virtues are gradually established." [2]

Politeness is that role that men and women play, the pretence of virtue from which virtue arises. So we must first acquire the appearance and manner of "good behavior" and then imitate it. It is from this that we gradually develop the habits of virtuous behavior.

In his excellent book, "Great Virtues," Andre Comte-Sponville said that, "Without politeness we would have to be virtuous to become virtuous." Comte-Sponville continues by telling us, "Morality starts at the bottom – with politeness. But it has to start somewhere." [3]

But why does politeness come first? Comte-Sponville wrote, "The priority I have in mind is not cardinal but temporal; politeness comes before the other virtues in the sense that it serves as the foundation for the moral development of the individual." [4]

People have always been aware of this and have invented codes of civility for us to follow. For example, the French Jesuits composed a code of civility at the Jesuit College of La Fleche in 1595. This code, *Bienséance de la conversation entre les hommes* ("Decorum in Conversations"), formed part of their educational system. The first English translation of this little book appeared in about 1640 and became popular in the English-speaking world.

Richard Brookhiser, the American author of "Founding Fathers," maintains that in writing about these codes of civility "all modern manners in the Western world were originally aristocratic. Courtesy

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meant behavior appropriate to a court; chivalry comes from chevalier – a knight." [5] The Jesuits took these rules and wrote out a system of courtesy that saw people as equals or near-equals. They were based on the simple premise that if we show our respect for others, we in turn will grow in virtue. The key message is that if we practice these rules we will grow in virtue.

Oddly enough, it was George Washington who made the English-language translation of the Jesuit rules popular. Washington as a boy had copied the translation as part of a handwriting class. Later Washington's admirers published a copy under the title of "Washington's 110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." These were rules of politeness which Washington himself practiced; the Jesuit rules of civility became part of a value system that was translated into many languages.

Bienséance de la conversation entre les hommes was written nearly 400 years ago and served many people well, including George Washington and others. We may need something similar today.

Etiquette for Dummies

Some attempts have been made, including a short book called "Common Courtesy" by Judith Martin. This writer claims that the solution lies in teaching etiquette or simply the practice of good manners. She then goes on to outline what good manners are.

Others have said that such prescribing can lead to snobbishness. They further point out that politeness without virtue can be equally as destructive for the individual as bullying and the use of insulting and belittling language. However, we should be careful not to be unfair to people who make a sincere effort to be polite.

There is, of course, the danger of embracing only the superficiality of empty politeness. People can take politeness to a point of near perfection where politeness is the be-all and end-all. They remain its prisoners and hide behind their sophisticated smokescreen. They cannot empathize with others or even expose themselves in the slightest. They are either dupes of custom and propriety or use it as a strategy to dominate others.

For example, Comte-Sponville said, "If a Nazi is polite, does that change anything about Nazism or the horrors of Nazism? No. It changes nothing, and this nothing is the very hallmark of polite-

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ness… A show of virtue, its appearance and nothing more."[6] We can safely deduce that if a gangster is polite, it certainly doesn't change anything about his criminal nature, although it may make the whole affair a little more agreeable.

This sort of politeness is nothing more than a show or appearance of virtue. Refined scoundrels may put a high value on politeness, but it changes nothing about their lack of virtue. After all, if a thief is about to steal your wallet, his civility won't make it any more moral.

Saving grace, saving face

In the book "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage," Brown and Levinson argue that there are two forms of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness.[7] Positive politeness treats the listener as a friend or as someone to be included in discourse. Negative politeness is designed to save face.

For example, if someone is wearing clothes that are out of place or the colors clash, you might say something kind in order to help the wearer save face, such as, "Your suit looks great on you," even though you feel it is out of place. In negative politeness, a little hypocrisy is inevitable. The justification for a little hypocrisy is that it may do more good than harm at certain times. Your intention is good, even though your behavior may be a little forced. Your aim is to help the other person save face.

If, for example, you have an impossible sister-in-law, you may decide to make great efforts to be tolerant toward her and purposely search for the good in her, for the good of the whole family. You may lack a sincere liking for her, but you have a sincere will to be tolerant and make the relationship work. Indeed, to do this, you may very well have to be hypocritical at times. Although this is negative politeness, it is done with good intentions.

The *Financial Time*'s Alison Maitland quoted a **London Business School** professor in the same article as saying, "The erosion of hierarchy and authority, and the growing pluralism of society, has left people less clear about how to behave at work."[8] Bullying and verbal abuse are reported to be on the increase. So how should managers behave?

Peter Drucker, the management guru, emphasized that; "Good manners are the lubricating oil of organizations." Some of the advice given to us by Drucker and others for developing polite

behavior is easy to understand such as listen to others, don't interrupt them when they are speaking and concentrate on the other person.

So what about our refined scoundrel? What about the honorable lout? They have the basis of politeness on which virtue can be built and certainly their wrongdoings are no reasons for us to reject politeness as a priority in our organizations. ■

1. Don't interrupt others when they are speaking.
2. Treat each person you meet as if he or she is truly important.
3. Listen! Listen! Listen! Develop good listening skills.
4. Learn to remember the other person's name.
5. Don't mentally cut out if you are not immediately interested in what the other person is saying.
6. Respond in a visible way to the other person by smiling or using his or her name.
7. Concentrate on the other person rather than on yourself.
8. Use sincere flattery, as people often respond positively to a genuine compliment. But if you don't feel it, don't say it.
9. Give a firm handshake; look the other person in the eye for about 60 percent to 70 percent of the time. Search for something attractive in the person.
10. Don't go overboard with assertiveness, as this could be construed as arrogance.
11. Be proactive with people. Take the initiative with them.

References

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