Where would you like me to sit?

Manners and Grace at Business Meetings

About a month ago I read an article on the art of shaking hands – it was the better part of a page in one of Canada's national business newspapers. You need only shake hands with three different people at a meeting to know why such an article was penned.

I did a Google search for "books on etiquette" and got 423 hits – *423 books currently in print* on the topic. From 'being a lady' to 'conversation and charm'; from "Town and Country Social Graces' to 'Business Etiquette for Dummies" - the list goes on. Books by designers like Kate Spade to books by the grandchildren of the famed Emily Post – manners are in. Poor manners exhibited by the uninformed – are definitely out.

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Why? Could it be that along with pearls, cashmere and swing dancing, manners are back? Thank goodness.

Meetings are a critical part of professional life. Job interviews, practice group meetings, client meetings and business development meetings. Meetings in the office, meetings over lunch, meetings to negotiate a transaction and meetings in chambers - their boardroom, our boardroom and off-site boardrooms. Opportunities to participate in meetings happen several times a day.

The following are some tips that will help you to participate in business meetings with confidence. You have an opportunity to make an impression from the moment you get off the elevator until the moment you get back on. Every time you walk into a boardroom you have an opportunity to leave an impression about yourself. A positive impression about your ability to handle the social graces of a business meeting helps to create an impression about your capability as a lawyer.

Tip No. 1: Stay standing until your host arrives.

There are lots of things to do once you have been shown into a boardroom. You can admire the art, review your notes or admire the view – just don't sit until your host arrives. Your host may have invited others to the meeting. Your host will likely have a favorite seat. More importantly you won't have to struggle to your feet in order the shake hands when your host arrives.

Tip No. 2: Where would you like me to sit?

This question allows the host to organize the meeting in a manner that is comfortable and in an arrangement that accommodates everyone who will be attending – even those who have not yet arrived.

Tip No. 3: If you travel in pairs, sit on the same side of the table

Previously, when visiting a client with a colleague, invariably we would be shown into a boardroom and we would typically sit on opposite sides of the table. Our client or potential client would enter the room and sit at the end of the table. I quickly discovered that our poor client was at a tennis match – bouncing her gaze back and forth between us.

More recently, I attended at a boardroom to present my findings on a project to the key decision makers. I wanted to be sure that they were both in my view so that the presentation could be a conversation and so that I would not be bouncing back and forth between them. I asked the host where he and his colleague would typically sit and then asked if I may sit *here*.

How many times have you gone to visit a client – perhaps to present to your client's executive team? (If you haven't – seek out these opportunities. Get a tour of the client's operation and meet with senior people on their turf.) Chances are there is a pecking order. The boss will have a favorite seat, perhaps with a key assistant or "right hand" who will indeed sit to the boss's right.

Tip No. 4: When someone offers a refreshment – accept it graciously

In most law firm boardrooms, clients and other guests of the firm enjoy the benefits of refreshments. It's kind of like visiting your Grandmother's house. When she offers you something to eat and drink, you take it…and you say thank you, even if you've just come from another function and you can't stuff in another drop of water.

I was recently in Washington DC and talked about this article with a friend over lunch. She shared a story about a meeting a few years ago. This meeting was to negotiate the terms of a significant financial transaction and was in the boardroom of one of New York's most well regarded firms. A young associate from the host firm literally grazed at the refreshments throughout the meeting, getting up and down at whim, refilling his plate and frankly not paying attention to what was going on in the meeting. Others at the meeting were embarrassed for his firm and frankly embarrassed for him because he clearly needed some skill development. It gets worse – since the associate was the son of a highly influential client and the partner felt powerless to say anything.

This lack of manners reflects on the individual but it also reflects on the firm. This lack of manners will negatively impact this individual's career. No matter where he started in life, his future success is now his responsibility – but in this case his firm has an obligation to give him feedback and opportunities for appropriate skill development.

Tip No. 5: When you are presenting – stick to water

Many firms schedule meetings that involve nonbillable activities over the lunch hour. *If we feed them they will come.* As a presenter to such a meeting you can do one of two things. Arrive early and eat – get it out of the way. Or, accept a glass of water and eat when the meeting is over. This is a great opportunity to debrief with your host who will likely stay for a bit and provide you with immediate feedback on your presentation.

There is another fact of professional service – that is the reality of 'transference'. If you handle each critical meeting with grace you will be perceived to be a successful professional. A positive impression about your ability to handle the social graces of a business meeting will create a positive impression about your capability as a lawyer.

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