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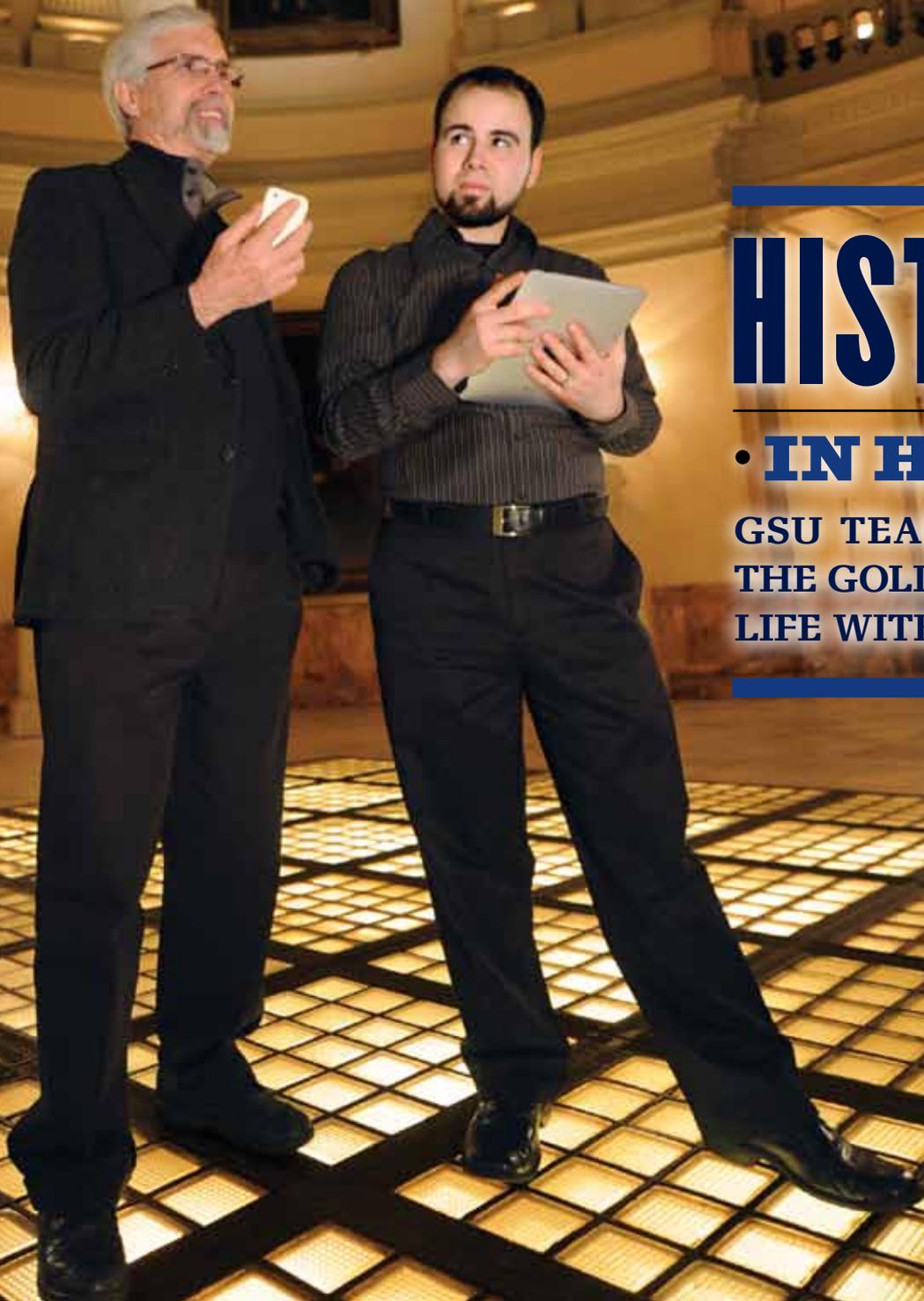
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BUSINESS *Etiquette*

HERE TO STAY,
SO TAKE NOTE

MANNERS NEVER GO OUT OF STYLE

Etiquette is such an old-fashioned word, inviting visions of pinky fingers properly perched by porcelain cups, and haberdashery held patiently in chivalrous hands. Of French origin, the word can seem hoity-toity and off-putting.

But make no mistake. Despite decades of cultural evolution and ensuing iterations of etiquette defined, its basic premise has not changed. You ignore it at your own peril, especially in the business world.

So what is the basic premise of etiquette?

“For me, it goes beyond the Golden Rule,” says Tony Alessandra (Ph.D. ’76), author and motivational speaker, referring to the 2,000-year-old rule that suggests how we want to be treated should dictate how we treat others.

“I like to add what I call *The Platinum Rule*, which says, ‘Do unto others as they want to be done unto,’” Alessandra says. “Respecting others means learning to treat different people differently according to their needs, not ours. This leads to greater understanding and acceptance all around.”

It’s a fine point, but because the workforce is more ethnically diverse than ever and encompasses, for the first time in history, four generations of employees (the Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y), it’s an important one. It implies an opportunity to learn about others, and to condition ourselves to care about what motivates each person with whom we interact.

According to Beverly Langford, clinical assistant professor of graduate-level management communication at GSU’s J. Mack Robinson College of Business, that caring must be genuine to be effective.

“When we extend genuine courtesy to others,

they respond positively to us,” says Langford, author of “*The Etiquette Edge: the Unspoken Rules for Business Success*.” “Having people respond positively to us is a great confidence booster. In turn, as we become more secure about ourselves, we become increasingly comfortable treating others well, and courtesy becomes an integral element of our character.”

It doesn’t hurt, however, to give students a jumpstart by building courtesy into their curriculum.

The Department of Marketing’s Business Communications program, which Langford directs, lets students showcase their grasp of do’s and don’ts for specific business scenarios in class presentations. The BCOM 3950 class covers topics such as shared workspaces, manager-employee communication, corporate meetings and events, innate differences between co-workers, and the use of electronic devices.

The course, which also focuses on professional development, would win high marks from high-profile executives at companies such as The Coca-Cola Company, IBM, Procter & Gamble, Georgia Power and Kimberly Clark, to name a few. In a 2007 departmental study on workplace communication, these executives were among the many who placed social interaction – business etiquette, professional behavior, conduct in social situations and building relationships – as schools’ most important area of instruction for business communication.

These same executives said companies are putting a greater emphasis on relationships and the behavioral nuances that maintain them. The message: Workplace decorum is a growing concern, not a waning one.



MODERN-DAY ISSUES

Ironically, the emphasis on relationships comes just as employees, particularly new ones, interact less through face-to-face or voice communication and rely more on electronic devices. Socially speaking, that's destructive.

At best, electronic communication limits input, obscures context, distorts feedback and allows distractions. At worst, it eliminates critical body language, creating a void for the recipient to fill, usually in a negative way, according to research by renowned body language expert Patti Wood.

In her work, Wood has witnessed all kinds of negative-filled voids in communication.

Before speaking to a group of M.B.A. students about a year ago, she shook hands with many of the students attending the event. During her speech, however, things went differently. As she approached one audience member, expecting to engage her in a simple, instructional handshake exercise, the student curled her nose, puckered her mouth, recoiled and announced, "I don't shake hands."

"That may sound like exceptional story," Wood says, "however, the human resource executives and small business owners I consult with on interviewing methods say they now have many job applicants who refuse to shake hands."

Debbie Rodkin (M.B.A. '00), executive director of RE:FOCUS on Careers, a local networking group, says that, barring any religious or immediate health issues, such behavior is, at the very least, odd.



"The No. 1 rule in business etiquette is to make the other person feel worthwhile," Rodkin says. "Be professional. Be genuine. Be interested in other people. Remember, it's not only about you."

Margaret Matthews, director of development at GSU's Byrdine F. Lewis School of Nursing and Health Professions, agrees. In her role, personal presentation is of utmost importance. That means, among other things, showing respect toward others by wearing proper business attire and dining with good manners. Unfortunately, she says, given the business-casual workplace, those traditions seem to be losing significant ground.

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"I don't care how old you are, manners never go out of style," Matthews says. "If you know them, they give you confidence."

Matthews stresses two important points regarding personal appearance. One, dressing well doesn't mean spending a lot of money; rather, it means putting together what you have in a professional way. And, regardless of your rebellious nature, understand that the culture you're targeting sets the tone for your attire. In other words, if you're trying to land a job for a conservative Fortune 500 firm, don't expect your new tattoo to win over the hiring manager.

GETTING – AND STAYING – HIRED

Christa "CiCi" Pierce (B.A. '10) says her approach to business etiquette, particularly when getting to know a suitor in an employment relationship, is to assume company managers are quietly, strategically testing you. She's still being courted by one of the most attractive of employers, Google. One night, Google invited her to a social event.

"They had a layout of food and alcohol; a lot of the younger applicants went for everything but I didn't do it," Pierce says. "I don't drink alcohol in front of recruiters. I feel like it's a test; it feels like they're taking notes."

Whether Google's recruiters actually welcomed Pierce to the bar or not, the company that personifies the unconventional workplace at least knows now that Pierce can swim against the mainstream. It's that kind of personal constitution that can make business etiquette a breeze for some to master.

Terrance Rogers (B.B.A. '10), who headed to work for a New York investment bank shortly after he graduated, also knows how to tailor his behavior to suit the environment. For him, it was a matter of bridging regional language differences.

"In the South, I was used to saying, 'sir' and 'ma'am,'" Rogers says. "But in the Northeast, it can come off as making a statement about someone's age. They prefer the first name and tell me, 'I'm not your grandmother.' I'm learning how to switch. Addressing them how they'd like to be addressed is giving them respect."

Rogers is the kind of employee that Ben Loggins (M.B.A. '75) would likely hire in a heartbeat for his CPA firm, if only for Rogers' attentiveness toward others' needs. That humility, that ability to place one's self in another's shoes, is the very foundation of etiquette, personal or professional.

It might very well be the foundation, too, for staying hired in today's economy. For small-business owners like Loggins, with clients to please and deadlines to meet, now is not the time for employees to be asking, "What's in it for me?"

"Employees must conform to the needs of the company," Loggins says. "They can't focus on the minimum they can do to get by."

If you're a job candidate who, for example, tends to focus on the salary and benefits of a position before you've considered the skills you bring to match the requirements of the job, Loggins says, you might consider adjusting the way you look at this particular business relationship.

Is that a question of business etiquette, or a matter of simple work habits? For Elizabeth Robertson (M.B.A. '11), it's all in how you define it. For her, etiquette involves "interpretation as to what your actions mean to others."

"It's your everyday experiences on site," Robertson says. "It's what behaviors are okay and what behaviors are not okay."

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Having studied organizational effectiveness, Robertson is aware of many other dynamics that shape today's work environments, both internally and externally.

One that has changed over the past several decades is the manner in which we give or accept praise or criticism. Social mores now suggest we be just as mindful of those who shy from public praise as we are of those who, more understandably, balk even at private criticism.

"It's important not only to provide praise, but to provide it



in a face-to-face conversation," Robertson says. "Face-to-face is powerful, and the other person will respect you more."

As for criticism, remember that each employee, deep down, really does want to know where he or she stands. The keys, however, are to focus on the issue, not the person, and to provide possible alternatives to the action under scrutiny.

"When it comes to critiquing others, you don't want to be seen as a complainer. Offer a solution," Robertson says. "Say, 'Here's what is not going well, here are some problems.' Then ask, 'What are we going to do about it? If we do X, this might be better.' Be proactive."

No doubt, honing business etiquette skills takes time and discipline, both in gaining understanding and in implementing what is learned. The upshot is that these skills, themselves, are marketable. That's especially important in today's economy, whether you're heading into the workforce or are already there.

"Failing to recognize how you can seize a competitive advantage by leveraging good manners and courtesy in the workplace can undermine your good efforts on the job," says Langford.

"Don't assume that just doing a good job will get you noticed," Langford adds. "In today's highly competitive, information-overloaded, speed-of-light environment, reluctance to make sure that you get the right kind of attention can be damaging in the long run and rob you of the opportunity to reap the recognition and the rewards that you deserve." 🌊

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