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Tel: (02) 9267 3800

Editorial - Jo Knox

Subscriptions and administration - Carla Cotter

Advertising - Kellie O'Donnell

WEATHER PROFESSIONAL STORMS WITHOUT DAMAGING YOUR PERSONAL BRAND

By Elena Reed, style & image consultant www.evolutzia.com.au

Good manners sell, while bad manners discount, according to style and etiquette consultant Elena Reed. Here, she explains how to handle situations at work that put your professionalism to the test.

Reed, from style and etiquette specialists Evolutzia, outlines some common "sticky" situations you might find yourself in at work and how to deal with them while protecting the integrity of your personal brand.

Sticky situation #1: Is this your idea or mine?

You've spent countless hours and sleepless nights nurturing a thought from infancy to brilliancy; now a more 'proactive' colleague has presented your masterpiece to the world as work of their own. Bang! It hurts. It's nasty. It's unfair. What do you do with an offender who whisked your moment of glory away?

First, take a deep breath. Heat of the moment decisions are not your best strategy. Rationally assess the facts. Is the person in question a mean go-getter or was it just a simple mistake?

Go and talk to them; open professional conversation can save relationships. Chances are, they will be grateful and volunteer to solve the issue.

If, however, you are met with a cold stare, you might be dealing with a ruthless 'career builder'. Don't accuse them because they'll never admit it. Instead, inform your superiors by simply stating the facts but not unleashing your emotions. Or, perhaps, let it go. Dirty tactics like these are not long lived in the professional world.

Sticky situation #2: That's not what I meant!

You are fuming. Can't they understand that the new policy is not going to work? Who could possibly come up with such an absurd solution? Luckily, you see Mary and tell her all about it. You feel better. If only someone warned you that your boss was passing by and overheard your less-than-flattering comments about him...

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Mum was right: "Don't bitch about colleagues and superiors on company premises."

Now that you've been caught red-handed, however, you've got some cleaning up to do. Apologise to the boss and admit your wrongdoing. It may be hard, but the sooner you do it, the better.

Explain why you feel the way you do and try to work out your actions in tune with the policy. One day it will be your turn to make those decisions, and surely there will be those taking it with a grin. Until then, bite your tongue and work your way to the top.

Sticky situation #3: Romance is in the air

Blame the spring weather, but you can't get over that new marketing consultant in the office. Eyes meet, flirty remarks are exchanged, and eventually, your work computer becomes your partner in crime by generating love-fueled emails. Welcome to the world of office romance - thrilling, exciting, and often awful and disappointing. If only the heart and mind worked in sync!

Many workplaces have a 'no-relationships' policy, so be sure to check with your HR department before you get too deep into anything. Consider the consequences. If your affair breaks as dramatically and rapidly as it started, are you prepared to face your ex on a daily basis?

If you both see yourselves living happily ever after, deal with your feelings in a professional way. You may feel like you're on a honeymoon, but work is work. Save hugs, cute names, and flirting for when the both of you are behind closed doors.

Your boss needs to know your circumstances have changed, and it's best that it comes directly from you. When questioned by your team mates, don't try to deny it. Prepare to admit it and they will get used to it.

Sticky situation #4: Have I asked for your help?

As tempting as it might be to tell Sue to tweak her report or advise James to find another barber, no-one likes 'I-know-better' smarties.

Unless your role requires you to do so or it directly impacts on your work, don't give feedback unless you are asked for it.

It may be that a person you are willing to help is not ready to talk about it yet. Maybe they need some time to see it for themselves. It's their learning curve. Besides, you don't want to be held responsible if the advice you give doesn't work out the way you hoped. Mind your own business. Be there for them when they need you. When they require your guidance they will ask for it.

Sticky situation #5: From dawn to dusk

Don't you love it when you are taken away to a five star hotel? Expenses paid, canapés on offer and unlimited drinks. Kudos to corporate event planners! These days office parties are snappy, chic, and a lot of fun.

There you are, drink in hand, schmoozing around. After working hard, it's your time to play.

But stop. Re-think. Re-evaluate. You don't want to end up with your head down the sink, toilet paper all over, and the boss walking in. Know your limits and observe them religiously. Your reputation is worth more than a midnight spree.

If the demons somehow dazed your consciousness and the last thing you remember was dancing on the tables, there are some things you need to do the morning-after. First, find your boss and apologise. Don't pretend nothing happened; do whatever it takes to ensure that behaviour like that won't be repeated. Stick to your promise. It's your last unspoken warning. If colleagues make jokes about it, have a short laugh with them and be wise to change the subject. There's a lesson to be learnt.

Sticky situation #6: Good people don't gossip...

Right? Wrong! Office gossip is a good thing when done in style. The key is to use it for research and networking and not for grouching or grumbling.

Sure, you have better things to do and deadlines to meet but every now and then, you need to come out to your local coffee hub. Firstly, you do not want to be seen as a bore, outsider or not a team player by avoiding these informal chats. Secondly, being present is a wonderful opportunity for you to do some internal investigation.

What's going on within the company? How can you be in line with others and keep your own individuality? What are the industry trends? Is there a hidden opportunity you are not seeing or creative ways to maximise your day-to-day efforts? Do you need to adjust your approach to stay abreast? Who are the centres of influence at your workplace and how do you get them on your side?

Be strategic about gossiping. Listen more and talk less. When you do talk, make it a good talk. It's karma - what goes around comes around. Wholeheartedness, verve and grace are contagious.

Sticky situation #7: It's time to go

Good or bad, changes can be challenging. It might be that you feel it's time to try yourself in a different branch. Or perhaps, you've had enough and you are looking for another company to represent. Or (may this never happen to you), you are getting fired. Whatever the reason, things look more glamorous over the hedge and you are making a move.

Rule of combat one: Leave with dignity. You don't want to be yet another employee escorted from an office building by security guards.

Rule two: Honour your company's confidentiality. Professionals stay ethical regardless of the circumstances.

Rule three: What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Do not tell the world derogatory stories about your previous employer, former boss or past colleagues.

The feedback you give about your past is an indication of what you are going to say about your present. Don't jeopardise your future chances. Eventually the ripples dissolve and you'll be grateful you didn't dampen your image.

A final thought

Good manners won't substitute the skill and knowledge you need to perform in your role. They will, however, give you a competitive advantage, and over time will help you to position yourself as an industry icon.

It takes years to build a reputation and one silly action to stain it. Learn from advice generously shared with us by Sheryle Moon, Australia and New Zealand director of the Ross Julia Ross group of companies: "Before you do anything, write anything or say anything, think, what would it look like on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald?" It's food for thought, isn't it?