

Guest column: Why manners — and Southern etiquette — can make a difference in business



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By Frank Williamson

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As a Southerner by birth, I grew up in a culture where manners were of paramount importance.

When interacting with authority figures and peers, I came to understand the social benefits of maintaining proper eye contact, saying “please” and “thank you” and having a firm handshake.

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Yet, out in the professional world, I've been struck by how the continued value of these and other niceties isn't commonly discussed. According to some studies, social skills are 85 percent responsible for personal success, as opposed to 15 percent from learned technical skills.

Out of the 10 U.S. cities boasting the highest levels of business growth, seven are located right here in the South, according to a recent CNBC article. The past five years have seen huge levels of business and employment growth in Southern cities, including Nashville, Orlando and Charleston, South Carolina.

I don't think this is a coincidence. Although our region's economic success certainly can't be attributed to solely etiquette, as a Southern business owner, I feel that it has played a part in businesses deciding to establish themselves here.

With civility seemingly on the decline in our world, it's worth thinking about how we can incorporate this general attitude of courtesy into both our work and personal lives.

Respect in the negotiation process

First impressions are everything. When you treat a business partner with a lack of respect during the process of making a deal, you shouldn't count on the relationship continuing. But, by bringing a different attitude to the negotiation process — treating it as an opportunity for both sides to solve a problem rather than as a situation where only one side wins — you have the potential to build a relationship that extends beyond a single deal and may result in a more mutually beneficial agreement.

In my experience, those who adopt the attitude of a hard bargainer are being short-sighted, trying to extract some kind of immediate value from a deal instead of seeing it as the first step in a lasting partnership. Naturally, you have to prioritize your interests in any negotiation, but empathizing with what the other party hopes to achieve can make a huge difference in the way you relate to each other.

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I saw this dynamic play out recently with a client, a family-owned business that was up for sale. One buyer stood out from the others by the level of consideration he showed toward the family, which was understandably concerned with continuing its legacy. The buyer's approach took into account the benefits of maintaining a strong, lasting relationship, while keeping his own business interests in mind. In the end, both parties felt the sale was a positive experience.

Balancing work and life

Some business owners may disagree with me, but I believe that the time we spend away from work is as valuable as the time we spend building our businesses. It may not always seem wise to leave work undone just so you can make it home for a family dinner. But, there's a good argument to be made that the Southern tradition of keeping a healthy work/life balance has the long-term benefit of setting up the next generation for success.

I'm not advocating giving short shrift to business matters. However, there is real value to leaving the office at 5 p.m., staying largely offline during dinner and through the evening and letting your home life be your primary focus until the next morning.

A major part of Southern civility is our continued devotion to passing on our values to each successive generation, both in our families and through nonprofits. By putting time and effort into this, we raise up a new generation that will eventually enter adulthood with an understanding of how Southern etiquette can be applied to their personal lives and business relationships.