

## Williamson: Why Southern manners still matter in the business world

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Growing up in the South, we're taught that manners matter.

Maintaining proper eye contact, saying "please" and "thank you" and offering a strong handshake are considered ways to gain favor in school and among peers, but those simple niceties are rarely discussed once we begin our careers. However, studies show that 85 percent of a person's personal success is based on social skills, compared with just 15 percent for learned technical skills.

Seven of the 10 American cities with the highest levels of business growth are located in the South, according to CNBC. Cities such as Nashville, Orlando and Charleston, South Carolina, have seen significant increases in numbers of businesses and paid employees over the last five years, earning them a place at the top of the list of America's biggest "boomtowns."

And that's no coincidence. While etiquette certainly isn't the sole cause of the region's economic success, it has arguably played a part in why people choose to bring their businesses here.

In the professional world, Southern manners translate to three main things: respect and deference to others during negotiations, a commitment to roots and community and a philosophy that emphasizes a work-life balance. These are as much a part of professional attitudes as they are of socializing — particularly in a world where civility is largely on the decline.

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## **Respect during negotiations**

As the old saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” If you treat someone with a lack of respect in the course of making a business deal, that relationship most likely won’t continue — personally or professionally. By approaching every negotiation as a joint problem-solving opportunity, as opposed to a win-lose situation, you will build long-lasting relationships and create better agreements.

If you’re trying to be a hard bargainer, you’re more likely trying to claim an immediate value out of the deal rather than seeing a possible long-term benefit of the relationship. You should always take care of yourself in negotiations, of course, but considering the potential benefits for the other party makes people want to do business with you.

I saw this clearly play out with a recent client: A family business was up for auction, and the buyer separated himself from the crowd by his care and consideration for the family. He showed an obvious effort to work with the family to continue its legacy. By taking a problem-solving approach and considering the lasting impact of a strong relationship, both parties were pleased with the sale’s result.

## **Commitment to community**

Similarly, every community is impacted by the business decisions that are made within it. By taking a long-term view of the business deals you’re doing, and doing them with a respect for the communities in which you operate, you ultimately set your business up for success with the community’s support behind you.

Chattanooga’s [CO.LAB](#) has followed this philosophy fully. They have set standards centered on inclusion of all parts of the community, because ultimately, when everyone has equal opportunity to build his or her business, the entire community succeeds.

## **Work-life balance**

Choosing to leave the office before dark, even when there is work left to be done, may not seem like the wisest business decision at times, but small decisions like these have a lasting impact. Arguably the most crucial attribute, the Southern tradition of maintaining a work-life balance sets up the next generation for success.

While it is, of course, crucial to be present and active in all business matters, it’s also important to remember the value of leaving the office at 5 p.m., setting down your work phone at the dinner table and being present of mind during conversations at home.

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Dedicating time and attention to younger generations — be it members of your own family or through a local nonprofit organization, for example — is a large part of Southern civility. It's a commitment to raising the next generation to uphold the same values and a devotion to continuing the legacy of Southern etiquette in business matters.

Whether in a coffee shop or boardroom, Southern manners are an essential part of everyday social life and business culture. Maintaining proper respect, dedicating time to your community and committing yourself to the next generation will continue to drive business to the South, thus boosting the economic growth and development of Southern cities.

*Frank Williamson is the founder of [Oaklyn Consulting](#), which helps private companies complete mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and other strategic transactions; arrange financing; and manage investor relationships.*