



# Special Report

## Office Civility 92 Rules for a Productive and Courteous Workplace

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## Life in a Fish Bowl

Cubicles or "cubies" abound, whether you work in a Fortune 500 company or a small family-owned business. They serve the purpose of allowing many employees to occupy a single floor while providing an enclosed workspace. When you don't qualify for the corner office, a "cubie" can be a "home away from home," a place where we can hang family photos and other memorabilia.

*It's difficult to concentrate when you're surrounded by incessant sounds, smells and conversations.*

Cubicles appear to be your own private place in the office, but in reality, they are only a semblance of privacy. It's like working in a fish bowl. Colleagues may stand behind you as you read your mail, people hear you when you speak on the phone and it's difficult to concentrate when you're surrounded by relentless sounds, smells and conversations. The partitions of your cubicle don't allow any privacy and this can result in a great deal of tension, both for you and your colleagues.

How much do we really need to worry about office or "cubie" etiquette?

*What's the number one cause of stress in the workplace?*

A survey of 2300 people conducted by [www.truejobs.com](http://www.truejobs.com) indicated the number one cause of stress in the work place was co-workers annoying habits. Sixty percent said that these annoying habits affected their work performance, while forty percent said that as a result they looked for other employment. The number one complaint—talking too loud on the phone. The number two complaint – people complaining about work.

*Co-workers annoying habits!*

A gallop Poll in 2001 reported:

- 80% of workers feel stress on the job
- 14% felt like striking a co-worker in the past year but didn't
- 1 in four reported being driven to tears at work

It's obvious bad manners in the workplace can negatively impact on everyone.

Although etiquette for etiquette's sake is an empty activity and a meaningless ritual, genuine good manners and a working knowledge of professional behaviour are essential and productive business skills. Showing respect for colleagues humanizes and harmonizes the work place, business relationships and promotes a powerful spirit of co-operation.

Whether you're in a cubicle or you share an open workspace, here are etiquette rules to follow if you want to strengthen relationships with your internal customers—your colleagues:

### **Don't be a Prairie Dog.**

Prairie dogs are those head bobbbers who constantly pop up over the cubicle walls to make remarks or ask questions like:

"Hey Mike, got a second?"

"Kathy, can I borrow your hole punch?"

"Anyone want leftover sandwiches in the boardroom?"

*Statistics report that today our work is interrupted about every three or four minutes.*

Prairie dogging is just one of the many ways employees demonstrate a lack of courtesy for their cubicle neighbors. Constant interruptions make it difficult to concentrate on your work and surveys have shown when you are interrupted it takes approximately 20 minutes to return to the level of concentration you had reached before you were interrupted.

1. Instead of peeking your head over the top of your neighbor's cubicle every time you have a "quick" question, get a little exercise by walking around the corner and asking it directly.
2. Assume that there is a door on the cubicle and those cubicle walls go all the way to the ceiling.

3. Do not use sign language or whisper to attract the attention of someone who is busy or on the phone. Saying, "I know you are busy...but... this will just take a minute," does not excuse the interruption.

*If you can smell it on yourself, you're wearing too much.*

### **Respect your neighbor's nose.**

4. That perfume, after-shave or scented body lotion you're wearing may smell great to you but it could be too strong or offensive to your co-workers. Because of allergies, many offices have a no-scent policy. If you can smell it on yourself, you're wearing too much. The best way to find out is to ask your neighbor.
5. Practice good hygiene. Bathe, wear deodorant, use mouthwash and wear clean clothes.
6. Keep your work shoes on. Conceal that pair of sneakers you wear to the gym at lunch in a plastic bag and store them in a drawer or closet.

*One employer reports, "If I can smell you, I won't hire you!"*

### **Decorate with taste.**

7. Most people like to bring a little bit of home to work to make their cubicle feel more friendly or comfortable. Be selective when displaying family or pet photos or your children's artwork. Edit your collection, frame it if possible and hang it neatly.
8. What about stuffed animals, Elvis posters, lava lamps and other funky decorations? They don't belong in a professional work environment! When decorating your "personal space," keep it simple and limit it to a few attractive items.
9. Be mindful of the image you portray to your co-workers and customers. People will judge your level of

*Be selective when displaying family or pet photos or your children's artwork.*

professionalism based on what they see in your surroundings.

10. Keep the cartoons, inspirational quotes and jokes to a minimum as others may be offended on moral, cultural, religious or sexual grounds.

### **Limit personal calls.**

11. Whenever possible, plan to make and receive personal phone calls during lunch or breaks. Your private life is your own business, and you should not inflict it on your neighbors.  
No one wants to listen to your wedding plans, arguments with your spouse or the details of your weekend exploits.

### **Keep private matters private.**

12. Do not exchange confidential information in a cubicle. Whispering to another person in your cubicle can be insulting to the people around you. Sometimes people are more inclined to listen when they hear whispering.
13. Cubicles offer very little privacy, so move to a different location if you must discuss something in confidence. Use a conference room or a vacant office.
14. If you overhear a private conversation, keep the information to yourself. You do not have the right to comment on a conversation that took place three cubicles away.

*If you overhear a private conversation, keep the information to yourself.*

### **Use your library voice.**

15. Speak softly. Be aware that a loud tone of voice is distracting to your co-workers and can make it difficult for them to concentrate on their tasks.
16. You need to be especially sensitive to this issue if you laugh loudly or have a voice that carries. Ask your co-workers, "Is my voice too loud?"

### **Request an invitation.**

*You'll scare the dickens out of a co-worker if you sneak up behind them while they're deep in thought.*

17. Don't sneak up on others. You'll scare the dickens out of a co-worker if you sneak up behind them while they're deep in thought. Follow the practice of knocking on the cubicle wall first.
18. Don't just barge into a co-worker's cubicle and plop yourself down in their chair. Ask if they have time and wait for an invitation to enter and take a seat. Respect your colleagues decision if they are too busy to see you at that moment and arrange another convenient time to talk. Remember the business priority, conversations should be work related; limit your social chit chat.
19. If your co-worker invites you in but does not offer you a seat, it generally means they don't want you to stay too long.

### **Give them a sign.**

20. Post a sign or flag at your cubicle entrance to signal when you can be interrupted. Let your co-workers know about your new system and assure them that you aren't trying to be rude, you simply want to let them know when you can give them your full attention.

*If possible, make it more difficult for co-workers to interrupt you.*

21. If someone is hovering near the entrance of your cubicle, avoid eye contact if you do not wish to be interrupted. Or, since some people won't get the hint, ask if you can schedule a later time to see them.
22. If possible, make it more difficult for co-workers to interrupt you. Arrange your desk so it faces away from your cubicle opening but not with your back to the entrance.

### **Take your cell phone to lunch.**

23. Don't leave your cell phone in your cubicle when you are away from your desk. On the one hand, you may forget to turn it off and it will annoy your neighbors. On the other hand, it's a valuable piece of equipment that contains private information and can be easily lifted by people who are not trustworthy.
24. Turn off your cell phone and pager when you are in your cubicle. If you must leave them on, keep the ring volume low or set it them on vibrate mode.
25. If you need to make personal calls on your cell phone, conduct your business away from others during your breaks.

*Eating also creates noise such as rattling of chip bags and candy wrappers, not to mention chewing and crunching.*

### **Control your snack attacks.**

26. Eating lunch at your desk may seem like a perfect way to get more work done, but your co-workers may not appreciate the smell of your fried chicken.
27. The smell can float over the tops of the cubicles and drift throughout the whole department.
28. Even a simple snack like licorice has a strong smell. Some people love it and will pester you for free samples. Others will find it obnoxious.

29. It's best to save fresh fruit for the break room because it can have a strong smell. If you must eat fruit at your desk, discard your banana peels and apple cores in a wastebasket in the cafeteria or lunch room.
30. Do not microwave food and bring it your desk. Hot food has stronger smells than most cold foods and nothing is worse than the smell of burnt popcorn. The smell of microwave popcorn can invade whole floors of offices and unless you are prepared to share it with everyone should be avoided altogether.
31. Keep in mind that eating also creates noise such as rattling of chip bags and candy wrappers; not to mention chewing and crunching. These noises are added distractions for your co-workers.

#### **Desk Top dining.**

32. Consider having lunch away from your desk. Studies have shown that eating your lunch away from your desk results in greater productivity.
33. According to a 2002 study conducted at the University of Arizona, the average desk has 400 times more bacteria than the average toilet seat! Crumbs can attract insects or rodents and spills could potentially be hazardous around computer equipment and keyboards or on original documents.
34. Employees who eat at their desk are regarded as less professional by their coworkers even if they also eat at their desk. Chewing with an open mouth, scattering crumbs everywhere and inhaling one's food are not the sign of a polished professional.

#### **Don't play with your electronics.**

35. Never use your speakerphone for conversations or to retrieve your voicemail, If you do, your colleagues will have to listen to your messages and phone conversations.

Also, most people do appreciate being in a phone conversation when the other party has their speakerphone on. It creates a hollow sound and the person you are speaking with may be concerned about privacy.

*Your cubicle gives your colleagues and people around you an impression of how professional and reliable you are.*

36. Use headphones if you listen to music and keep the volume turned down far enough so your neighbor doesn't hear the bass. Remember, not everyone has your taste in music.
37. Turn off the audio sounds on any electronic device such as a PDA, Blackberry or pager.
38. Mute your computer's audio or turn it way down so your neighbors don't have to hear your email alert for every message you get.
39. Make sure that the screensaver you use on your monitor is an appropriate image without sounds.
40. If you are using the copy machine or other equipment and it jams or runs out of paper, take care of it or call for service. Don't just leave it for the next person.

### **Clean up your act.**

40. Your cubicle gives your colleagues and people around you an impression of how professional and reliable you are. It should be kept clean and uncluttered, with documents filed in their proper places. If your area is a mess, others may question the quality of your work.
41. When you decide to clean up your act, do it after work or on a weekend so as not to disturb your co-workers.

### **It's not the Botanical Gardens.**

42. Many companies have a policy that employees cannot bring live plants to work even though they can serve as good privacy screen. They leak water, attract insects, drop leaves and die.
43. If you are allowed to have green plants or other foliage in your workplace, check with your co-workers before bringing them in to make sure no one has plant allergies.
44. When in doubt, leave the foliage at home and bring in a silk plant.

*Your co-workers don't want to be exposed, nor do they want to take your cold or flu home to their loved ones.*

### **Mail goes in the inbox.**

45. If you need to drop something off for a co-worker, place it in the in-basket on their desk.
46. If you must leave papers on a chair, attach a note indicating what they are. Include the date, time and your name.
47. Your best bet is to simply ask your co-worker, "Where would you like me to leave information or materials for you?" Then, respect their request.
48. Set up a system in your own cubicle for receiving information and materials from others.

### **Don't be a martyr.**

49. If you are ill, stay home and suffer in private. No one appreciates martyrs in the workplace. Your co-workers don't want to be exposed, nor do they want to take your

cold or flu home to their family.

*Standing around waiting may send a message to your colleagues that you don't have enough work to do and have too much time on your hands.*

50. The first few days of an illness are when a disease is most contagious. Do not come to work if you are throwing up, fainting or coughing.
51. If you have a fever, you are too sick to be at work.
52. If you feel well enough to get some work done, arrange with your boss to work at home until you're well.
53. Keep in mind that most businesses use heating and air conditioning systems that continually re-circulate the germs throughout the building. You could be infecting employees in the rest of the building.

### **Pretend the walls go to the ceiling.**

54. Don't hang around a cubicle entrance waiting for your colleague to get off the phone or finish a conversation with someone else. When you are on the phone, it's very distracting to have someone lingering within earshot. Return to your desk and come back at a more convenient time.

*When you have a visitor, you need to stop what you're doing and give that individual your full attention.*

55. Standing around may send a message to your colleagues that you have too much time on your hands and don't have enough work to do.
56. If you are busy, it's an annoying distraction to have another person is hanging around or looking over your shoulder reading your computer screen.
57. Do not invite people into a colleague's cubicle without their permission.
58. Don't carry on conversations with others outside your cubicle or in the hallway. If you have time to chit chat or

gossip in the hallway perhaps you don't have enough work to do.

### **Respect your visitors' time.**

59. The choice is yours whether you're going to invite someone into your cubicle or not. However, when you do have a visitor, you need give that individual your full and undivided attention.
60. Value your visitor's time. Ask what they want and stay focused on accomplishing what they need.
61. If you're listening to music, shut it off and remove your headphones. They interfere with your ability to listen and communicate effectively.

### **Watch your language.**

*It is never appropriate to swear or to use vile, crude or lewd language in the workplace. Period.*

62. Be mindful of the style of humor you use in the workplace. Some people think sarcastic humor is funny, but most people don't. In fact, most people don't get it unless they're sarcastic, too.
63. It is never appropriate to swear or to use vulgar, crude or inappropriate language in the workplace. Ever. Once something comes out of your mouth, you can't take it back and most likely you will have offended someone.
64. Weigh your words. Pause, think about what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. If you share an off-color joke with a friend, the people around you may overhear it and be offended by it.
65. Language needs to be preserved at a professional level. Your co-workers may not complain to you, but they may complain to the boss put your job or reputation at risk.

*Get up and move around. Try to walk outside at least 10 minutes each day. You'll have fewer health and muscular problems.*

### **Shake it up.**

66. Health problems can occur from sitting too long in the same position or straining your neck by looking over your shoulder instead of turning your whole chair around to talk with someone.
67. Get up and move around. Try to walk *outside* at least 10 minutes each day. You'll have fewer health and muscular problems.
68. Do some simple stretching exercises. Stretch your arms to the ceiling and bend from side to side. Stand up and give yourself a shake to loosen up.

*Find out how your co-workers perceive your style and learn to adapt the way you communicate in order to build greater rapport and trust.*

### **Don't touch!**

69. Just because you view staplers, tape, scissors, pens as company property, you do not have the right to walk into your colleagues cubicle help yourself.
70. A good rule of thumb to follow is: don't borrow from your neighbors without asking first. Then return it as quickly as possible.
71. If you need supplies, get them from the storeroom. Keep yourself organized and you'll be able to keep track of what you require and what you have already.

### **Respect differences.**

72. There are as many different types of people as there are ways of doing things. Recognize and respect others and learn to adapt the way you communicate in order to build greater rapport and trust.

*Go back to the manners you learned in kindergarten and start applying them in the workplace.*

### **Mind your manners.**

73. Civility and simple courteous phrases are often lacking in the workplace. Remember to say, “Good morning,” “please,” “thank you,” “may I” and “excuse me.”
74. Multi-tasking can be interpreted as bad manners. You can’t be attentive to another person when you’re reading your email.
75. Go back to the manners you learned in kindergarten and start applying them in the workplace.
76. Try to solve problems with co-workers, such as personality conflicts and minor irritations, at the lowest possible level. Don’t take every little problem to the supervisor. State objections calmly and deal with differences tactfully.

### **Respect workspace.**

77. If you are sharing a workspace don’t take more than your half of the space allotted. Keep your papers, files, clothing and equipment on your own side and keep it tidy.
78. Don’t crowd the cloakroom with last season’s wardrobe, coat, shoes, boots or packages that you need to take home.

### **Avoid eavesdropping.**

76. Cubicle walls rarely reach more than five or six feet high

so sound travels easily over the top. If someone in a cubicle near you asks his or her neighbor a question, you need to resist the urge to call out the answer.

77. Use selective hearing to tune people out so you are not listening if you haven't been invited to participate in the conversation.
78. Eavesdropping is a two-way street. Your co-workers are more likely to listen to your conversations if they know you do not respect their privacy.

*If your co-worker is not acknowledging your presence, he probably does not want to be interrupted.*

### **Respect meditation.**

79. Don't assume a colleague isn't busy just because they're not on the phone or typing on their computer. They may be thinking about solutions to a problem or engaging in creative thought.
80. Thinking is a necessary part of the work environment. If your colleague is not acknowledging your presence, he likely does not want to be interrupted.

### **Limit interruptions.**

*If your co-workers hear you gossip, they are probably wondering what you say about them behind their backs.*

81. Do not interrupt two co-workers who are engaged in a conversation. Do not interrupt if someone is writing, reading email, typing or deep in thought. Walk away and wait for a better time.
82. Set appointments with your cubicle neighbors to ask questions or discuss ideas. This shows them that you honor their time and workload.

### **Avoid the gossip train.**

83. The gossip train starts when an employee overhears just

a portion of a conversation, forms an opinion and passes their own version along. They were not privy to the whole picture, the background information or what led up to the decision. They spread only bite-size pieces of information that have been taken out of context.

84. If your colleague hears you gossip, they are probably wondering what you say about them behind their backs. Gossip creates a toxic atmosphere of distrust, and wastes precious time.

### **Redecorate after hours.**

85. If you decide to hang shelves or move your desk, save these activities after work or on weekends. The sound of grunting and furniture sliding creates too much distraction for your colleagues. Save your redecorating projects for times when other employees are not around.

### **Escort others out gracefully.**

86. If someone enters your cubicle and you want to keep the visit short, stand up and meet them by the entrance. Don't sit down.
87. When you want to conclude a lengthy meeting in your cubicle, stand up and begin walking toward the door. Thank your colleague and say, "I'll walk out with you." Be honest about your reason for ending the meeting.

### **Create a Cubicle Code of Ethics.**

88. Get the whole team together and identify the barriers to a creating a pleasant and productive workplace. Focus on

issues, rather than blaming or pointing fingers.

*Ask the team, “How can we make this environment more pleasant, efficient and productive?”*

89. As a team, identify and prioritize the solutions to those barriers. Then ask the team, “How can we make this environment more pleasant, efficient and productive?”
90. From your solutions, create workplace standards and cubicle etiquette rules. Get everyone involved in the process to create a high performance team.
91. Post your Cubicle Code of Ethics in a place where all employees can easily review them.
92. Include a discussion of workplace etiquette in every staff meeting. Place emphasis on the positive rather than complaining about the negative.

*“If someone does something that bothers you, don’t do it yourself!”*

--Louise Fox  
*The Etiquette Leader*



## *Louise Fox*

Louise Fox is the owner of The Etiquette Ladies, Canada's Experts in Children, Youth, Teens and Business Etiquette, The Etiquette Leader and a partner with Civility Experts.com and Center for Organizational Cultural Competence. She has been trained and certified in Business Etiquette and International Protocol at the prestigious Protocol School of Washington and the International School of Protocol In Baltimore.

Louise has over twenty years experience in the food service, hospitality and special event planning industries. Following a successful career as a social worker and provincial government consultant, she trained as a chef at George Brown College and the Cordon Bleu School in London England. Louise owned a country inn in Muskoka for ten years and then after studying Event and Meeting Management, took her talent and creativity to the corporate world as an event planner for a major international law firm in Toronto. Louise is also the director of the International School of Service and Hospitality and trained through the Federation of Dining Room Professionals program in customer and dining room service.

She is the etiquette coach for Women's Network top rated television program "Style by Jury," the consultant on the Food Networks new show "Chef School," and a guest expert on the Slice Network's "Mom Show." She is the etiquette coach for the Toronto Argonauts Cheerleaders, and an instructor at Georgian College. She has been featured in newspapers such as the Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, National Post, Vancouver Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Hamilton Spectator, Edmonton Journal, Regina Leader-Post, Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Victoria Times Colonist, Metro News, Business News, magazines such as Flair, Canadian Living, Chatelaine, Glow, Oxygen, Canadian Parent, Today's Parent, AOL, Modern Bride and is a frequent guest on Breakfast Television, CTS, Omni, Rogers, Global, The Jill Deacon Show, Entertainment Tonight, Much Music, Living in Toronto, CBC Newsworld, CTV News, Business News Network, CBC's Steven and Chris Show and many national radio programs across Canada and USA including CBC's live shows "The Current" and "Ontario Today."

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**Louise presents business etiquette, international protocol and dining seminars to business professionals who wish to "Outclass the Competition." Her programs for children, youth and teens develop social and leadership skills and build confidence and integrity.**



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