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Avoiding Etiquette Missteps

Today's legal offices bring together a diverse cross-section of people from all backgrounds and ages. While understanding and accommodating various personality types is an important career skill, there are certain work habits that seem to annoy professionals across the board. Moreover, the proliferation of electronic communication has increased the potential for etiquette missteps.

Inappropriate workplace behaviors can range from the aggravating (talking too loudly on the phone) to polarizing (arguing about politics in the office) to downright weird (muttering audibly to yourself). Even though you may not be an office offender, as a legal administrator you're often expected to be the firm's standard setter and occasional peacemaker.

By guarding against some of the following irritating behaviors – and discouraging them among staff members – you can help set the tone for a more pleasant and courteous office environment.

Sensitive subjects. There's a good reason people are commonly admonished to avoid public discussions about politics and religion: They're lightning-rod issues. But in an election year, political talk often creeps into the workplace, sometimes in an innocuous way, but it inevitably leads to verbal jousting and bad feelings and can increase workplace tension. For this reason, some offices have policies against overtly political or religious discussions in the workplace. You may want to consider implementing one.

Olfactory offenses. Office workers sometimes forget that their cubicle is not their castle. As a result, they often inflict their tastes in cuisine on their co-workers. Because it's hard for others to work when they're overcome by the smell of someone's reheated dinner emerging from the office microwave, consideration should be the rule when it comes to in-office dining. The Szechuan take-out one person had for dinner last night might sound appetizing to that individual but may be stomach-turning to others, especially in cramped offices or those with poor ventilation. If employees must heat up a pungent meal, encourage them to consider eating it outside or, at the least, in the office lunchroom, rather than at their desk. On a related note, also discourage staff from waging an olfactory assault with strong or over-applied perfume or cologne.

Broadcasting without a license. A common workplace offense is talking too loudly on the phone, especially a cell phone, assuming it's acceptable practice to use them in your office. People sometimes inadvertently turn up the volume on their vocal chords, especially when there's background noise or they're particularly engaged by the topic at hand. Strive to be sensitive to this pitfall. Private conversations start to be an office

problem when they keep others from concentrating on their work or having enough quiet to conduct their own phone calls. In these cases, staff members may need to be reminded to take phone calls that exceed the acceptable volume threshold to a private part of the building. Other auditory annoyances that should also be eschewed include popping gum, humming or singing along to one's iPod.

Coworker cherry picking. The golden rule goes a long way in an office environment. Legal administrators can set the tone for inclusive behaviors by encouraging group get-togethers, such as lunches to celebrate a colleague's birthday. By taking the lead in organizing such events, those in management roles can help reduce the problems of office cliques and factions, which can alienate those who aren't part of the "in crowd," and promote greater camaraderie among work teams.

Engaging in e-nnoyances. Electronic communication is another area where rude behavior is rampant. Sending inappropriate jokes or unwanted spam, visiting questionable websites and overusing the "reply all" option are some of the most common problems, and they often occur even in offices with policies in place to prevent Internet and e-mail abuses. Although some colleagues in many offices view these practices as acceptable, strict adherence to firmwide policies on electronic usage should be expected. Legal professionals should also steer away from lesser offenses such as forwarding potentially sensitive e-mails without the sender's approval. Chances are the sender would have cc'd others if he or she thought it was necessary or wanted others to read the message. Keep your e-mail communications professional, to the point, and directed to the right people.

Unfortunately, most office workers don't enjoy as much privacy or freedom as they would like at work. And when working in close quarters, it's no surprise that the boundaries of office etiquette may sometimes need to be reinforced. By exhibiting respectful behaviors themselves, legal administrators can serve as role models, helping to set expectations for conduct and cultivating a more hospitable office environment for all.