

# Business Etiquette Basics: Transition from Classroom to Boardroom

by Sylvia Mendoza

Judy Davidds-Wright was surrounded by young, professional Latinas, all graduates of prestigious colleges such as Harvard, Stanford, University of Southern California, and Berkeley and now making a name for themselves in their chosen careers. They had been brought together to be a part of a nonprofit organization through which they would mentor high school Latinas, helping them build self-esteem and confidence as they learned about the business world.

non-Anglo, and one of the youngest ones there. I was determined to never feel that way again.”

That discomfort might have helped inspire her to pursue etiquette training for students and business professionals.

Many Latinas, she says, associate etiquette with “prim and proper” – and for Anglos. “It can be tough when someone recommends you take a class. Don’t take it personally. They may have your best interests at heart.”

(www.distinguisheprofessionals.com), a bilingual company that teaches business etiquette for a variety of cultural and socioeconomic settings and backgrounds. She travels the world offering business etiquette seminars to college students, young professionals, high-tier executives, corporations, professional organizations, and business leaders.

“I have watched sophisticated professionals commit basic faux pas resulting in embarrass-



Judy Davidds-Wright, founder and director, Distinguished Professionals Inc.



Sue Fox, founder, Etiquette Survival, and author of *Business Etiquette for Dummies*



Sandy Punch, director, Career Center, CSU-San Marcos

Then the Stanford graduate asked how she could build self-confidence in others when she lacked self-confidence in certain areas of her own life.

“I asked in what areas. She immediately answered ‘business dining.’ She wondered which fork to use in the right way in five-star restaurants. As she said this, the rest of the women expressed the same sentiment.”

Davidds-Wright remembered that when she was 21, working in corporate marketing and special events, she was invited to attend a gala at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills. “I was so uncomfortable. I was the only female, the only

“See it as an opportunity to improve yourself. The investment is worth it in the end.”

In her research, Davidds-Wright learned that “Business etiquette is not for the rich. It’s not about holding up your pinky when you drink or about chewing with your mouth closed. The key to etiquette is knowing how to behave and knowing what to say and do in any given situation – with the ultimate goal of making others around you feel comfortable.”

She attended the Protocol School of Washington and became certified in corporate etiquette and international protocol. In time, she launched Distinguished Professionals

ment and loss of credibility,” she says. “You don’t want to be one of those.”

College students and professionals – everyone – can gain by learning etiquette protocol, says Davidds-Wright.

“On paper, many professionals or corporations appear equally qualified, but life is not played out on paper. There is an art to networking, and many important business relationships are forged or cemented over a meal or event. You can gain a sense of empowerment and greater success in the corporate arena by knowing how to use etiquette to your advantage.”

## First Impressions

“What’s definitely true in a lot of interviews – you have 30 seconds to make a good first impression,” says Sue Fox, founder of *Etiquette Survival* and author of *Etiquette for Dummies* and *Business Etiquette for Dummies*.

Interviewed on a news show, she noted the severe lack of proper etiquette displayed by students.

“It’s pretty shocking how young people were going to job interviews. They were not dressed properly. They were chewing gum. Had dirty hair and nails and wrinkled clothes. There was no eye contact, and they didn’t offer a handshake.”

Graduating students might be ready to get a job but struggle with business-etiquette know-how, whether it’s dining with executives, introducing themselves and others, or learning to network at functions with ease. If they are being recruited by potential employers, they might be taken to the Biltmore or Ritz-Carlton. Putting the candidate in such a situation could be part of the interview.

Initial introductions are visual, based on how a person looks, says Davidds-Wright. Next there is body language, tone, and what you say.

“The last thing you should be concerned with at a dinner or function is etiquette or which fork to use,” says Davidds-Wright.

Some universities are incorporating business etiquette into their curricula, says Fox. Others offer etiquette and business-dining seminars through their career centers.

At California State University-San Marcos (CSUSM), the career center offers etiquette seminars to all majors at least twice a year. “There was a gap in their education and life skills when they found themselves at networking events,” says Sandy Punch, director of the CSUSM Career Center. “They found that in the middle of their interviewing cycle, and as they got closer to graduation, they needed a much more detailed approach to these events.”

A former elementary school teacher, Punch learned her basics from books by Leticia Baldrige, the protocol officer in Washington, D.C., during the JFK years, she says. She then formulated an outline of what students needed to know.

“They have to understand they will be thrown into a variety of situations, and they have to be prepared to make a good impression,” she says. “I want them to see that they’re not alone.”

They can start learning by doing their homework. There are rows and rows of etiquette books in bookstores and much more information on the Internet. Then they should get hands-on experience, Punch says.

## The Scene: A Restaurant

The Etiquette Dinner for All Majors is a

hands-on seminar offered at CSU-San Marcos and sponsored by Associated Students Inc. For \$10, students not only received a four-course meal at a nearby country club, but a lesson in etiquette and social skills.

After signing in, students are instructed to place their nametags on their right lapel. Tables are filled to capacity with students, professors, and guests. At one table, there is a junior and business major Emily Nugent, finance major Kamal Elbanna, student affairs VP Daphne Killion, and Spanish major Mary Edrington, who has returned to school now that her children are older. All have come to improve their skills and their chances at landing a job when they apply.

Punch reminds them to think business. “You’re not here for the meal. You’re here for the interview. Dining etiquette is good business. They’re evaluating you to see if they could dress you up and take you out or if you could entertain potential clients.”

Her sensible advice: “Eat a very large breakfast so you won’t be ravenous.”

The situation might start out intimidating. “You look at the place setting and you wonder – what in the heck is mine?” says Davidds-Wright. “Just remember that a place setting is a map that tells how many courses will come.”

Punch offers a handout with the layout of the table settings. She starts out bulleting important basics:

- Immediately upon being seated, the napkin should go on your lap and should never be tucked into your shirt collar, she says.
- If you need to leave that table, put the napkin on your chair to let them know you’re returning.
- Have good posture with feet planted firmly under the table.
- Never put elbows on the table. After meals or in between courses, forearms can go on the table, but never elbows.
- Keep purses, backpacks, books under your chair so that servers will not trip over them.
- Wait until the entire table is served before you begin eating.

In another handout, Punch offers suggestions for starting small talk and breaking the ice. Again, it boils down to getting comfortable with yourself in this type of situation so that you might make others comfortable to talk and enjoy their meal, or at least their time at the table.

The seminars go into much more detail. The goal is for students to gain confidence in a dining situation and help them prepare for the next interview at any restaurant.

## Training the Trainers

Training young people in proper etiquette is a reflection of our society and future, says Fox,

who found her way into the field after working in modeling and as a makeup artist, and in marketing and event planning for Apple computers. After 10 years with Apple, she went on a paid sabbatical to Africa and Europe and thought about what to do with her life.

When she read *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher, it made an impression on her. “My daughters and girls I met through modeling all seemed to lack self-esteem at certain points in their young lives,” she says. “They lost identity. Grades dropped. Self-esteem plummeted.”

Fox left corporate America and developed “The Workshop” in 1994. “I wanted to teach self-esteem-building classes through modeling and comportment,” she says. She covered body language and added an etiquette component. “You can’t really have one without the other.”

She started with children and teens in the Bay area and received a lot of buzz and media coverage. Phones rang off the hook. She was approached by businesses and transitioned to offering courses to adults about business-entertaining basics.

“It made sense,” she says. Around the Silicon Valley where she had worked, the young executives were socially lost. “I was surprised at company and corporate executives who had no idea what to do.”

The lack of focus on manners and basic etiquette might have started years ago, Fox says. The pendulum might have swung too far in the ’70s and ’80s to an anti-establishment approach. “It became a fast-paced world,” she says. “We weren’t being taught at home because parents were working and we weren’t eating together, so we didn’t see by example.”

Today children might be seen as rude, but maybe they just don’t know otherwise, she says. We also must take into account the ways that technology has affected our youth and society as a whole.

“We’re anti-social – hiding behind e-mails and text-messaging. Once in the work force, many people are in cubicles. We need to remember how to socialize and learn those skills like any others.”

Fox became a protocol consultant and member of IAPC, the International Association of Protocol Consultants. *Etiquette Survival* became the first in the industry to sell to curriculum interests, says Fox. There are teacher kits for K-12 so that etiquette can be incorporated into their curriculum. “It’s invaluable and necessary for all students.”

The etiquette business keeps growing. Fox had four offers from publishers to write about what she was doing. She went with the *Dummies* series. “We liked the humor and wanted to show you could love and learn etiquette in a fun way,” she says. The books have been published in five

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**Sue Fox with her Global Adjustments affiliate in India**

languages, and new editions are slated to hit the shelves this year and next.

Etiquette Survival Inc. ([www.etiquettesurvival.com](http://www.etiquettesurvival.com)) has grown to include books and videotapes on proper table settings and on social etiquette for teens, children, and adults. There are also training materials for those who want to start their own etiquette business. "Buy a kit to start your own business in your own community, once you see the need."

She conducts a few seminars but is mostly in charge of product development now. A Los Angeles-based partner, Linda Caine, handles domestic training and projects. Fox has partners in India, Global Adjustments, to address international protocol. The motto: "Take Your Business Beyond Borders."

### The Future of Etiquette

College students have to be prepared for life beyond the academic walls.

"We have to look at the student as a whole," says Punch. "We have to prepare them for each step they have to take outside the campus, develop their social skills, and build their confidence. We have to fill in those gaps between academics and social skills. This will help prepare them for life management and the transition from college to career."

Jaqueline Franco is president of the Latino Business Students' Association at the University of California-Irvine, which sponsors Davids-

Wright's seminars. "Our business students attend chamber of commerce business meetings and community and civic activities. Judy's seminars give us confidence and teach us the basics. It's been the best investment for me."

International business is at our fingertips because of technology and globalization, says Fox. "Besides basics, you have to know something about the culture you're dealing with. Every one of them is different and may have a different approach to eye contact, a handshake, even a touch on the shoulder," she says. "It's very important to be aware of those differences."

Fox has traveled extensively, is well acquainted with various international cultures, and has provided train-the-trainer programs in India, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Japan, and elsewhere. With Global Adjustments in India, "We're working together to create a better understanding of people in diverse business and social environments."

She and her colleagues emphasize the importance of language, respect, formality, diplomacy, and personal presentation in every aspect of life. "If other cultures are eager to learn Western etiquette and believe it is important, then I hope college students would realize the importance as well."

Etiquette is education beyond book knowledge and is crucial to overall success. "People do business with people they like and trust, and

etiquette plays a big role in that," says Davids-Wright. "If you make them feel comfortable enough, and they know that you've taken enough time to get to know their culture and respect them, then you've made an impact."

### The Rewards

Davids-Wright believes in empowering students and that education is power. She brings the Business and Table Etiquette Seminar to some nonprofit organizations, including the National Hispanic Women's Association and Girls Incorporated.

"I want them to believe me when I say, 'I know you're smart, and now you can compete on a social level,'" says Davids-Wright. "They see I provide a safe environment. They end up happy to be there and walk away confident. They can see that with the proper training, everyone is on the same playing field when competing for a job."

Some of Punch's student have taken the seminars three or four times. "They tell me the more practice they can get, the better. They bring friends or a spouse."

Punch, Davids-Wright, and Fox all believe that etiquette is a matter of respect for self and others. It's being courteous. It's not elitism and not just for rich people.

