

## Addressing Abhorrent Behavior

by Beth Kwon | April 16 2007

Being smart and successful doesn't mean you're well-mannered. If you can't distinguish a fish fork from a salad fork or find yourself inadvertently insulting clients and colleagues around the world, it's time to hire your own Emily Post.

Three years ago, etiquette coach Gloria Starr had a mandate. A scruffy C.F.O. showed up at her door wearing an ill-fitting suit and big, tragically unfashionable glasses. He had pitiable table manners, thinking nothing of sneezing on his food, bringing his head down to his plate instead of raising food to his mouth, chewing with his mouth open, and forming an uncouth ring of bones around his plate while eating fish. "I told him he would lose his job unless he improved," says Starr, who whipped him into shape after three days at her Executive Finishing School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Starr is one of numerous coaches around the country who are helping executives who don't want their crude manners to derail their careers. "Companies are no longer accepting average dress and etiquette," says Starr, whose business is up 40 percent this year. Individuals who sign up for her modern-day finishing classes pay \$3,500 for a weekend-long crash course. Companies such as Merrill Lynch, Hewlett-Packard, and Toyota have also recruited her to bring refinement to their ranks.

Last fall, Gail Huneryager, a marketing manager at Grant Thornton, an accounting firm, hired Ann Hoover, founder of the Hoover Protocol & Etiquette Centre in Oklahoma City, for a workshop for newer employees. "Our younger professionals are technically brilliant, but they don't always have the soft skills," Huneryager says.

Participants peppered Hoover with questions about how to shake hands and what to do with their napkins during a fancy meal. "Etiquette coaching is about learning how to outclass



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the competition," says Hoover, who charges anywhere from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars for a session.

Some of the most common faux pas are surprisingly basic. "I get asked most frequently about how to use a knife and fork," says Samantha von Sperling, director of Polished Social Image Consultants, in New York City. "I often see people holding a knife and fork like they're weapons, and that disturbs me on a deep level."

Von Sperling offers global etiquette skills, giving pointers on proper chopstick use and explaining what not to do in the Middle East, where showing the soles of your shoes, for instance, is the equivalent of flipping a middle finger. She also delves deep into clients' closets, gently urging them to exchange middle-management gear like Banana Republic and Ann Taylor suits for brands more suitable for executives, such as Armani.

After a consultation with Starr, Mike Foster, C.E.O. of the Foster Institute,

a technology consulting company, followed her fundamental wardrobe tips, none of which had occurred to the self-proclaimed tech geek before. He dusted off the nicer suits in his closet and stored the khakis. The sharper look gave him confidence. "I feel better, and it helps me present myself better," he says. While the return on investment isn't exactly measurable, he says he has seen results even when traveling. He began getting upgrades to first class on flights and larger suites in hotels. He hopes the positive results will translate to his bottom line.

Manners, says Hoover, are about making people around you feel comfortable. "You'd rather be with someone who's nice and charming than with someone who's rude or boorish," she says. "It's common sense." As for Starr's slovenly C.F.O., he cleaned up well and kept his job. Starr checks in with him regularly; three years later, he's still minding his manners.