

## Say hello to unwritten office rules

There are many traps for the novice when it comes to workplace codes of behaviour, writes Sophie Toomey | *July 12, 2008*

**THE workplace can be a minefield when it comes to etiquette.**



Nina Sunday says personal problems can induce compassion fatigue. Picture: Vanessa Hunter

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24000316-5010800,00.html>

The rules of behaviour aren't always stated. But experts agree once you walk in the office door there are certain universal rules that don't vary from one job to the next.

The number one office blunder is disrespecting or demeaning colleagues, whether they be subordinates, peers or superiors. Nina Sunday, founder and managing director of corporate training firm Brainpower Training, says "an atmosphere of mutual respect makes people function better. There is no place at work for demeaning, belittling or de-energising comments or behaviour."

Little things matter. "Make a point to say hello on arrival, and good-bye at the end of each day. It's civil, common courtesy that is the glue of relationships." Sunday likens our interactions to an emotional bank account. "Every time we interact with a smile or friendliness we make a deposit. That creates high trust. Negative workplace behaviours like tantrums, put-downs, glaring, cold shouldering or rumours just overdraw the bank."

There is still a place for disagreement at the workplace. "Constructive debates over ideas are the right kind of friction and that is healthy in all teams."

Dressing for the office is another area where there are universal guidelines. No matter how casual the office, clothes that show too much flesh or are excessively tight and revealing don't belong at work. Ditto, sloppy dressing. If you want to appear serious about work and to look as though you care, overly casual or worn-out clothes are simply not going to cut it.

Excessive jewellery is another no-no. Jangling bracelets and necklaces not only look unprofessional but the noise of their clanging is nothing but distracting for co-workers and clients.

The excessive use of perfume is another office faux pas. Not everyone may love the fragrance and some people may even be allergic to it. Save it for a big night out, or keep it subtle and minimal. That said, always wear a deodorant. Workplaces can be stressful at times and visible sweat patches are for the tennis court. Other blanket no-nos are visible underwear, badly fitting clothes and drag queen make-up.

Margot Katz, corporate adviser and author of *Tarzan and Jane, How to Survive in the New Corporate Jungle*, says when it comes to office dressing, appropriateness is the key. "It is culture-driven and what is suitable is dictated by environment." Katz emphasises that dress does matter. "People do make decisions based on appearance, whether we like it or not, so make sure you get it right. Dressing is a massive part of communicating your personal brand, like the packaging on a product, to use a metaphor." Think about how you want to be perceived and dress accordingly.

People will also make snap judgments on the way we speak. One issue that arises is the question of when or if swearing is OK. Says Katz, "Language, like clothes, is culture-dependent and sometimes descriptive words like 'bloody' are all right." Katz says there are workplaces where swearing is not considered to be disrespectful or out-of-line with protocol. That said,

Katz specifies that swearing as part of speech and swearing at someone at work are entirely different. "It is never going to be acceptable to yell rudely or swear at someone."

Nina Sunday takes a harder line on swearing. "I don't think swearing at work is ever all right. If you are watching TV, you are warned ahead of time there'll be swearing and you can switch off. We are obliged to be at work. We aren't obliged to listen to profanities."

Office romance is another territory fraught with danger. A badly conducted romance can not only break your heart and ruin your time at work but could also see you on the receiving end of an harassment suit. A Griffith University study found that eight out of 10 people have started a romance in the office. Distressingly, figures also indicate that one in four office liaisons ends in a sexual harassment claim.

There is also the question of what's appropriate. Overt displays of affection between colleagues is always in bad taste, as are extra-marital affairs in the office. Katz adds that no office romance should affect your work: so leave the long phone calls for after work. "No one is going to make allowances if your work starts to suffer." Work relationships between two consenting and single parties, conducted discreetly and outside work hours, are the way to go, Katz says.

And a final word of warning. Dating a direct subordinate or your boss will never reflect well on either of you and has the potential to create serious suspicion about motives. Says Katz, "If you have a relationship with someone who answers to you, then who will ever trust your promotion or salary decisions? And who will trust that the conversations they have with you about work won't end up as pillow talk?"

While friendships at work are almost inevitable, maintaining boundaries between work and social life is a must. Katz says you must use good judgment and common sense when it comes to putting your personal problems and issues on the line at work. "If you are not sure, then don't bring it up. Remember that what you say could be used against you. So, unless you really trust the person, then don't do it."

Sunday adds that work teams can become like family, and we do turn to them for support in difficult times. "We shouldn't clam up about what is happening in our lives." Sunday says, however, that there are clear limits. "Talking about your sex life is out of bounds, as are any topics that are potentially inflammatory and make people feel uncomfortable. That takes religion, race and politics off the table." Sunday says another danger with personal issues is that colleagues suffer compassion fatigue. "Your team-mates' tolerance is going to wear very thin if you mention the same issue for weeks or months on end. You will lose respect."

Gossiping is another sure way to lose respect. Katz says that a little harmless gossip is natural and can be a fun way to build rapport with people. "In very small doses, it's appropriate. But the hard stuff is to be avoided at all costs: malicious gossip is just unacceptable."

Katz suggests applying a simple test. "Would you mind if it were being said about you? Are you being deliberately hurtful? Are you wasting time that could be better spent achieving something?"

Sunday believes gossip falls under the heading of demeaning and belittling behaviour, and adheres to the rule of saying nothing if you can't say something "nice".