

Workplace Faux Pas

Category	Professional Series	Date	December 01, 2008
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This EKTIMIS article marks the first in a series focused exclusively on the workplace. I thank my readers who specifically made a request for this initiative. After much thought I could not think of a better topic to lead off this workplace series than workplace faux pas! If you are not familiar with the term *faux pas*, then you are very likely a Gen-Y person—and that is not necessarily a bad thing.

So let's start with a simple definition. A *faux pas* is an expression from the French language that literally means a mis-step or false step. It is typically used in a social setting to refer to a violation of an accepted custom or protocol. For example, let's say that you were a guest at a social event and you did something that you thought was okay only to find out that what you did was grossly inappropriate and perhaps offensive, then you would have committed a faux pas. In this scenario you would attribute your faux pas to ignorance—lack of knowledge on your part.

Workplace Faux Pas

A violation of an accepted (or expected) custom or protocol in a work environment consistent with the workplace culture.

In a workplace there are many forms of faux pas, but these are typically associated with the workplace culture. Many workplace culture faux pas—such as inappropriate dress code, or poor choice of words—are momentary and soon fade away in time; unless of course, the faux pas is quite memorable and serves as a periodic source of comic relief!

There are other forms of workplace faux pas; forms that cannot be attributed to ignorance or an off-the-cuff moment. Three of these are increasingly plaguing young professionals in their daily work life, and it is these that I wish to bring attention to and keep in focus. These three may not fit the classic definition of a faux pas, but they are very important and may impact your career advancement—and I would argue that they qualify as faux pas.

The first critical workplace faux pas is a poor writing skill. We live in a digital age where communication and information exchange is becoming near-instantaneous. Communiqué is becoming very concise and often very cryptic—especially among the Gen-Y (persons born between the late 1970's through 2000), and to a lesser degree among the Gen-X (persons born between the mid 1960's through the late 1970's). The net effect is resulting in a digital age syndrome characterized by trends such as *texting* and *social cryptology*. One of the negative consequences of these trends is the increasingly poor writing skill emerging in the workplace.

Effective writing skills has always been and remains a prerequisite for performance in the workplace—in today's global economy. While it is certainly possible to get by in certain quarters of employment, it remains very difficult—or at the very least very challenging—to move up to leadership and management roles while maintaining poor writing skills. Writing skills are exhibited in email, memo, and formal reports communication. For an otherwise effective leader or a capable manager poor writing skills can reflect negatively and introduce

a sense of low standards or poor education. This negative reflection may very well limit a person's degree of earned respect—respect attributed to your actions and deeds.

The second critical workplace faux pas is poor verbal communication skills. This is especially common with the Gen-Y, many of whom are accustomed to popular culture terms and phrases that are fine within social circles, and even among close friends in the workplace, but are not impressive within professional circles. The further up the leadership track, or management track, you move the more vital it becomes to command respect by demonstrating proper verbal communication. This does not imply that you have to learn to speak like her majesty—the Queen of England—but rather that you lose the popular culture terms and phrases that are inappropriate within professional circles—especially in a global economy. Workplace verbal communication skills are exhibited in various forms — directly or face-to-face, during a telephone conversation, during a conference call, or during a group presentation.

The third critical workplace faux pas is poor mannerism and body language. This final faux pas is common to both Gen-X and Gen-Y alike. The quality of your manners and the nature of body language that I am referring to here fall in the realm of proper etiquette. Many employers do not maintain or publish a set of etiquette in the workplace, but rather they publish and promote a set of organizational values. Proper etiquette, as it relates to manners between employees as well as body language during interpersonal dealings is left to each employee; and therein lies the potential for faux pas. A subordinate speaking with a superior while keeping both hands in his—the subordinate's—trouser or pant pockets may communicate a subtle message of disrespect without realizing it; or a manager chewing gum obviously while conducting a team meeting may communicate a clear message of arrogance or lack of sophistication to her team and not be aware of it.

These three critical workplace faux pas have one thing in common—they are all forms of communication, and they reflect a lot about the inner aspects of us that are subject to psychological evaluation and appraisal by others. When it comes to critical workplace faux pas, ignorance is no excuse; the power to remedy these potentially costly mis-steps rests in the hands of each individual.

About the Author



Niyi Taiwo is the founder of EKTIMIS and the lead editor for the EKTIMIS eLibrary articles. He is the author of several books, including the EKTIMIS Top Ten Laws series. He is a continuous improvement expert with over 21 years of industry experience – operational, management and consulting. He holds an undergraduate degree from WPI and a master's degree from RPI. He is a certified Lean Expert and an ASQ-certified Six Sigma Black Belt.