



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Book Review: Manners Make the Actuary

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For over 35 years, Judith Martin has been offering up advice on etiquette in her syndicated Miss Manners column. In that time, she has written two novels, a travel book on Venice, and numerous etiquette books, such as *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (original edition published in 1982 with the most recent “freshly updated” in 2005) and *Star-Spangled Manners*, a history of American etiquette.

She also wrote the funniest review of *The Empire Strikes Back*, managing to remark on manners in its close:

Skywalker is never called to account for having behaved unpleasantly to his guru before knowing who he is—even to the extent of knocking food out of the hungry guru's hand. [*Washington Post*, May 23, 1980]

It is interesting that until now, Miss Manners has not compiled a book addressing business etiquette, even though it is a place where many adults spend a great deal of time getting on each other's nerves. To be sure, Miss Manners has received many business-related etiquette questions over the years, but until recently, she had kept her book-writing focus on behavior in the social, not business, sphere. Now joined by her son, Nicholas Ivor Martin, Miss Manners dives into issues of office parties, networking, and how to tell a co-worker they're wearing too much perfume.¹

MANNERS OR ETIQUETTE? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

As we are actuaries, we like being precise in our terminology. Miss Manners addresses both manners and etiquette, and I will let her explain the distinction below:

GENTLE READER:

Funny that you should ask about the obligations of both manners and etiquette. Miss Manners makes a distinction between them, with manners being the principles of courteous behavior and etiquette being rules that apply to a particular situation. [Page 30]

This is important to note. The principles of manners (such as consideration for others) are fairly universal in concept, but can differ greatly in specific application (which is etiquette). Business etiquette can vary quite a bit by country, region, and type of business. Miss Manners concentrates on U.S. general business etiquette, though she does touch on some specific professions within her book.

Alas, the actuarial profession is not one of them.

In the book, there is one overarching concept for business manners: They are not the same as social manners.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Miss Manners opens the book with matching letters to illustrate the principle: two situations where socializing is preventing business from being conducted, and one situation where a social situation (family holiday dinner) is being turned into a commercial transaction. Needless to say, Miss Manners frowns on these transgressions, and unsurprisingly, the social sphere impinging on the business sphere, and vice versa, occurs multiple times throughout the book. It even informs the structure of the book.

The very beginning of the book involves some of the situations most nerve-racking with respect to etiquette—the first two chapters are titled “Getting In” and “Getting Out,” about acquiring a job and leaving a job, respectively. These tend to be opposites in terms of behavior; people want to be at their most polite when seeking a job (though examples given in the book make you wonder), but when leaving a job, at least one party is often tempted to settle scores while walking out the door.

The beginning/ending dichotomy is the most anxiety-inducing because it involves significant interactions—in the case of leaving a job, this may (or may not) be the last interaction between the parties in a business situation; in the case of seeking a job, one may never be given another chance to present a good image of one's self to the prospective employer. But as Miss Manners

explains to a Gentle Reader, not all problems can be solved by etiquette:

The fact is that you cannot expect to be loved by someone you have fired. You remind Miss Manners of the kindly souls who inquire how to end a romance without making the other person “feel rejected.” [Page 52]

While Miss Manners never countenances rudeness, she is not above a few tart remarks to her correspondents when it comes to leave-taking:

Miss Manners thinks you were quite right to refuse to participate in the charade of regretful departure. Surely your disappointed colleagues are free to celebrate now that you are gone. [Page 59]

Your department sounds like a wonderful place to leave. [Page 60]

I love Miss Manners’ biting wit, which is why I keep coming back to her writings, though her advice rarely surprises me now. She has taught me her principles well, and the main matter is keeping up with changing expectations. The principles of manners never change, but the etiquette does.

ON AND OFF THE JOB: ETIQUETTE AND MONEY

The remainder of the book is split into two parts: “The Long Haul—On the Job” and “The Long Haul—Off the Job.” The on-the-job section deals with business communication, meetings, dress codes, icky topics (namely: smells, mess, health, and bathroom topics), paying attention, sharing one’s opinions (gossip and whining), and money matters.

While some of the chapters (such as “The Eeew Factor,” dealing with icky topics described above) provide a great deal of amusement as to how to navigate not commenting on one’s boss’s flatulence, the last chapter on discussing money is very insightful, not only in terms of gender issues surrounding money negotiation, but the way employers exploit social etiquette in trying to keep employees, current or prospective, from maximizing their own outcomes.

To be sure, Miss Manners recommends polite forms of monetary negotiation, but she puts forth the idea

that it is not rude to ask for more money, whether from an employer or a client.

An atmosphere in which no one petitions for a raise is indeed collegial to those who might have to give one. [Page 174]

But, as she says, there is a time and place for everything. Just because money matters are business matters, that does not mean one’s money is necessarily everybody’s business.

Again, I want to note that the specific etiquette Miss Manners is referencing is American. Some of the advice she gives would not fit in other cultures (yet). One of Miss Manners’ delightful opinions, by the way, is that it is better to give employees cash to demonstrate appreciation rather than throw whatever gift certificates one’s vendors and clients have given to the office (but no, really, I want to eat that chocolate!).

The last section deals with ways business can impinge on the social (or seemingly social) world, and this may be the area actuaries find the most helpful. There are chapters on business travel, networking, office parties, dealing with family issues at work (and vice versa), friendship, and office romances. Given the number of actuarial couples I have known, that last chapter may be of specific use. Indeed, some of the most active topics of discussion at the Actuarial Outpost revolve around the types of issues found in this section.

WHOM IS THIS BOOK FOR?

Mind you, actuaries tend to be very polite people, from my experience. Indeed, in a recent conversation with a recruiter, my interlocutor mentioned that dealing with actuaries was far more pleasant than dealing with the tech types he had worked with earlier.

Of course, he could have just been wise in indirectly flattering his audience.

The main group that would find this book helpful would be those new to the U.S. business world: perhaps the perfect gift for incoming interns or secondees. The book is set up in the broad sections as outlined above, and each chapter starts with the setting of the topic in question, along with a few basic principles. The bulk of the book is given over

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to the letters and responses, showing how the broad principles are applied in specific circumstances.

But even if one is meticulously polite and familiar with American business etiquette, this book can come in handy; most of the letter-writers are knowledgeable, polite people trying to be polite in difficult situations. For example, Miss Manners addresses a person who has been at the receiving end of an extremely rude public remark:

For anyone to make such a statement, especially at an office meeting, is breathtakingly rude. But it is not a personal problem, however personal it feels to have someone announce that she hates you. It is a personnel problem. This person can hate you all she wants, but should not be allowed to let it interfere with the work of the office or to stir up trouble by airing these feelings. [Page 156]

This is the difference in the social and business spheres—in the social non-family sphere, one usually has the option of not dealing with people who are rude or who hate you. But in the business world, if one wants to make a living, one must be professional. Though brushing up the resume to try to escape a toxic situation is always an option.

For Miss Manners, being the recipient of rudeness is no excuse for being rude in return. She gives helpful hints not only for the polite trying to navigate a rude business world, but also for those who feel their good nature is being taken advantage of. Politeness does not mean being the world's fool.

And one may have a snappy line or two in the bargain. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ *Miss Manners Minds Your Business*, by Judith Martin and Nicholas Ivor Martin. Norton, 2013 [page references from hardcover edition].