



# Courtesy

*the heart of*

# Leadership

by  
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STEWARDSHIP  
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“As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us;  
we are the builders of our fortunes.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Courtesy costs nothing, but buys everything.”  
Anon.

How important is it that others treat me with courtesy?

What courtesies do I expect from those with whom I work?

What courtesies do I extend to them?





Great leaders practice  
small courtesies.

## COURTESY: THE HEART OF LEADERSHIP

-ROD ZEEB-

When it comes to considering the benefits of being a courteous person, let's put it this way: if the topic for your college debate tournament was 'The Pros & Cons of Being Courteous,' and your team was assigned the 'Con' side (which means you would have to argue that being courteous is a counter-productive, dead-end attitude for saps), you might want to consider changing your college major. Or at the very least, you might borrow a slogan from Dante's Divine Comedy and hang a sign over the door that leads to your teams' debate preparation room that says, "*Abandon hope all ye who enter here.*"

There's just no getting around the truth that approaching every interaction with others with a spirit of goodwill that is manifested by courteous behavior will deliver tangible rewards at every step along the way, in both your personal and business lives. Those rewards include:

- People will be friendly to you.
- They'll seek you out, and reach out to you for friendship, advice and collaboration.
- You will communicate with greater clarity and credibility.
- You will be able to settle differences with friends, family and co-workers more easily. (For example, polite people don't use phrases like, "*OK, bub, it's my way or the highway. Which will it be?*") You will also experience a greatly decreased risk of making enemies.
- You will be easily approachable, which leads to having more friends.
- People will trust and rely upon you more.
- You'll find yourself involved in fewer arguments.
- Greater success at your job? Absolutely!

- You will become a more effective, empathetic, and efficient leader. Your colleagues and team members will follow your lead enthusiastically in good times, and give you the benefit of the doubt in tough times.

- You will find it easier and less stressful when you are dropped into a new environment. (Work, school, foreign travel, etc.) Most people will go out of their way to help out the ‘stranger’ in their midst if that stranger is sincerely courteous.

- In the eyes of most people, polite equals positive. Who doesn’t want to be around positive people?

### The world of math and science agree

Sir Isaac Newton’s (1642-1726) Third Law states that: *“When one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first body.”*

This fundamental law of mathematics has a direct corollary in the practice of courteous behavior: that is, when you exert the force of politeness upon another, they will (hopefully!) exert an equal level of politeness upon you. That’s the kind of math principle we can all get behind—and best of all, no algebra is required to make it work.

Beyond scientific explanations, there are quite practical reasons for striving to be courteous. Day in and day out for our entire lives we will be interacting with other people. That is not always an easy undertaking. At school, in sports, in workplaces, within our families, and in a myriad of social settings, we have to deal with people. (OK, unless you plan to model your life after the ascetic hermits of the Middle Ages, who renounced all worldly possessions and pleasures and retreated into mountain caves to contemplate whatever it is that hermits contemplate.) The bottom line is that you are going to be involved in tens of thousands of interpersonal activities during your life. That being the case, doesn’t it make sense to make those interactions as pleasant as you can? Courtesy makes that kind of life possible.

In its simplest form, courteous behavior is action that follows accepted rules of conduct and decorum that flow from an attitude of caring and respect for others. The attitude of ‘courteousness’ is translated into action through the use of manners, which are sometimes referred to as ‘etiquette.’ Countless generations of parents, teachers, faith leaders and coaches have guided young people to be courteous through the daily use of good manners.

Why? The easy answer would be to say that if we did not strive to be courteous, or did not care to act politely, the world around us would quickly descend into chaos and barbarism.

Imagine waiting patiently in line to take your turn at a store or airport counter only to have a couple of people shove their way in line ahead of you. And then to have even more people elbow their way in ahead of those folks. It doesn’t take much imagination to picture flying curses, groceries, luggage, and even fists in a situation like that.

Courteous behavior acts as a kind of preventative social medicine. When we behave politely, it signals our intentions to interact in a fair, equitable, and civilized manner with the people around us. When they respond in kind with their own courteous behavior, a powerful (though unspoken) social contract is sealed by all parties on the spot. Courteous is as courteous does, and in the hundreds of tiny, almost instinctively polite actions we take each day with the expectation that others will do the same, the bumps and bruises of daily life become a little less pronounced, and far less painful.

The manners, customs, and etiquette that together constitute courteous behavior have changed dramatically over the centuries, and they can differ widely from culture to culture. Even so, there are generally accepted standards of courtesy that apply almost anywhere and in any setting. That’s because when you come down to it, courteous behavior is really nothing more than the application of common sense in all of your interpersonal relationships.

That being said, there are some general guidelines for courteous behavior that are pretty much timeless, and that the world would benefit from if they were put into general practice. The guidelines are listed below, in no special order.

### Be on time

In fact, don’t just be on time, be a few minutes early. If you can’t help but be late, make sure to let them know as far in advance as possible, and don’t rely on weak (or amplified!) excuses to explain why you are late. This is all about respecting other people’s time. The lifespan of an average human these days is about 2,228,800,000 seconds. Who wants to waste any of them waiting on people who are late?

### Dress appropriately

Haute couture (OK, high-end fashion) is seldom necessary for everyday wear. But, wearing the right clothing in the right situation is not only respectful of people and places, but it is also good insurance against being embarrassed.

### Step up and say hello

People who take the first step forward, make eye contact and smile, and who behave as if they are the one who is

*“Courteousness is consideration for others; politeness is the method used to deliver such considerations.”* Bryant H. McGill



honored to get to know you, not you who should be honored to meet them, light up every room they are in. And here is an interesting cross-cultural fact: in almost every culture on the planet, tilting your head slightly downward (not a bow, save that for the Queen) when meeting someone for the first time is a universal sign of respect.

### Focus on them-not you

Well, yes, you know lots of cool things, and you have done a lot of cool things, too. But it's not your job to sing your own praises. Courteous conversations are dialogues, not one-sided, one person monologues. Ask questions that demonstrate that you are truly interested in the other person's background, knowledge, and skills. That will pump them up, because you are demonstrating that you are interested in them, and trust their viewpoints. Everybody has something to offer and teach; find out what that is, and you will have a conversation worth remembering.

### Thinking about giving advice?

Wait to be asked. It is said that the most critical skill we can learn in life is timing. (It's sure true for joke telling.) If you feel compelled to offer some useful advice, make sure your timing is right, and that you are also in the right situation. In most cases, the right situation is one where you have been asked for advice before you offer it.

### Don't judge. Ever.

There is a wonderful comedy scene that reminds us why we should not judge others based on 'instant' impressions. In the story, Charles is a wealthy, successful professional. One Saturday morning he is attempting to fix his kitchen oven, because the repair people aren't available on weekends. He puts on his old torn jeans and sweatshirt, and in a few minutes he is covered in oven grime from head to toe. When he realizes that he needs a tool from the trunk of his Porsche, he heads out to the driveway. As he does, an elderly neighbor lady comes down the sidewalk. She is pushing a shopping cart filled with empty soda bottles. Charles smiles at her, and then notices that she is limping badly.

Out of courtesy he asks where she is headed, and if he can help her. The woman is clearly relieved, and says she was on the way to the market to recycle her plastic bottles.

Charles politely steps up to the plate, and insists on doing the chore for her. He takes the shopping cart from his grateful neighbor, and proceeds down the sidewalk. As he pushes the cart into the parking lot of the upscale market, a well-dressed

couple walks up to him. The man looks at the disheveled Charles (and his shopping cart filled with 5¢ bottle refunds) with pity. He assumes that Charles is a homeless person, and hands him a ten-dollar bill. "I'm sorry you are down on your luck, pal, I hope this helps," he says.

Charles is too astonished to speak. Didn't the man recognize him from the exclusive golf club they both belonged to? Then he runs a hand across his dirt-covered face, looks down at his ragged clothes and the cart filled with empty bottles, and begins to laugh out loud. He is still laughing a few seconds later as yet another affluent couple get out of their car and proceed to hand him a cup of coffee before they head into the store.

It's a funny scene, to be sure. But it also conveys a powerful truth about judging others. Courteous people do not judge the person they are speaking to, in fact, they don't judge other people or other cultures, period.

Why? Well, beyond the obvious fact that to judge is to display bad manners, polite people also understand that they aren't perfect. One day it could be them pushing the shopping cart down the street in their dirty clothes.

*"Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth."*

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD)

### Say what?

Using technical or highly-specialized jargon with people who are not familiar with your topic can make you appear arrogant and out of touch. Mark Twain said it best: "Don't use a five-dollar word when a fifty-cent word will do." Although your five-dollar words may present an incontrovertible and indubitably sound epistemological denouement of your conversational partner's thesis, a polite person avoids such ontological heterodoxy at all costs. Or something like that.

### And speaking of speaking

Always pay close attention when others are speaking. Don't allow yourself to get distracted (your cell phone is off, right?). Researchers tell us that it takes 25 minutes to recover from the distraction of a phone call or an e-mail, and yet the average person receives such an interruption every 11 minutes. That means that we're never caught up; we will always be out of breath, and we will always be running late. Under those conditions, how will you ever finish a conversation?



### What to talk about?

An old proverb says that great minds talk about ideas, good minds talk about events, and small minds talk about people. As with most proverbs, there is more than a grain of truth in that statement. There is a time and a place for every type of conversation, but it never hurts to start at the top by taking the high road when it comes to topics of conversation. How often do conversations about people (who are not there to defend themselves!) remain positive and affirming? The ‘who are they dating, look at the clothes they are wearing, what’s with that old cell phone, and, what’s the problem with their attitude’ kinds of conversations typically end up going in just one direction—down.

Don’t just avoid gossiping, don’t even stick around if that’s what others want to do. You needn’t be afraid that suddenly excusing yourself from a gossipy conversation and walking away will cause anyone to lose respect for you, either: if they are gossiping, they don’t respect anybody.

It can be hard to resist the urge to stick around for the really juicy stuff, but keep this in mind: if you happen to be in Corner A with a few people who are gossiping about somebody over in Corner B, guess what the people in Corner B are probably talking about. Yep, that’s right, and it also explains why they are pointing in your direction and chuckling.

*“When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself.”*

Louis Nizer (1992-1994)

### If you mess up, fess up

Cowboy movie star John Wayne (1907-1979) once said, “Never apologize, it’s a sign of weakness.” With all due respect to Mr. Wayne (and mindful of the fact that he had a pair of Colt .45 Peacemakers strapped to his hips when he made the remark), it is likely that what he meant was, “don’t apologize over and over and over.” That is a sign of weakness. You know in your heart immediately if something you have said or done rises to the level of requiring an apology. If it does, apologize—just once—and then move on.

### Every chance you get

Congratulate and /or praise people on their accomplishments and successes.

### Now, that’s funny! Or not.

Be careful how and with whom you use humor, and always think about the appropriateness of any joke or story you are telling. The old rule that says you should picture yourself telling your grandmother the joke before you tell it to others still applies.

### Your memory is your best friend

One of the hallmarks of a great (and courteous) conversationalist is that they do their best to remember things about the other person and include those things in the conversation. From a question about their job to using their spouse’s correct first name, people you may have only met a few times truly appreciate that you remember the details about their lives.

### The awkward stuff

You are at a party and see an old friend across the room. You know her father passed away recently. What is the polite thing to do? Ignore it and just engage in some light banter, or address it head on? In most cases it is best to deal with the issue directly. Sincerely offer your condolences, let them know you have been thinking about them, and let them take the conversation from there. In many situations like this the person who has suffered a loss or other difficult life-event looks forward to getting past the awkwardness and back onto the friendship track. Plus, they will appreciate your thoughtfulness and sincerity.

### This wouldn’t have been a concern a few years ago

You may find yourself talking with someone who shares every bit of their life (too many bits, in fact) on social media. You might even have seen some of what



they have written. But, the best (and most polite) practice here is to steer clear of any mention of the wild, wacky, or weird postings they made, unless they bring the subject up themselves.

### Choose wisely

It is a good idea to be careful about the language you use, and the topics you introduce into the conversation. Use language that is appropriate to the people, time, and place. (And don't lose sight of grandma sitting over there in the corner listening to every word you say.) Nothing stirs the pot the wrong way as fast as a person who injects politics, religion, money, or other hot-button issues into the middle of a conversation so they can score some points or raise the group's collective blood pressure. (If your party is taking place at the United Nations, this rule may not apply.)

*“Good manners will open doors that the best education cannot.”*

Justice Clarence Thomas (b. 1948)

### Yes, you can be

There is a difference between being pushy and being assertive. Pushy is always impolite. But, within appropriate boundaries, being assertive means to be self-confident, decisive, emphatic, authoritative, and self-assured. (That includes not feeling you have to say 'yes' to every request or favor others may ask of you.) When demonstrated at the proper time and in the correct context, each of these traits allow you to relate to others in a way that is clear, unambiguous, and respectful of their beliefs and values. Confident, respectful assertiveness is generally more appreciated than timid or uncertain behavior.

### Remember: it's a two-way street

Wherever your conversation with others may go, and whatever topics you agree are fair game at the time, keep in mind that you will probably be listening to viewpoints, ideas, and opinions that may be different than yours. Be prepared for that, and be respectful of what they are saying. That doesn't mean you can't disagree or counter their ideas with your own, (See 'Yes, you can be,' above.) But, there is no substitute for respect in the course of a polite conversation. That even goes in the (hopefully unlikely) event that the conversation becomes more of an argument than an exchange of ideas. Should that occur, take the words of the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu (died 496 BC) to heart:

*“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”*

Polite discourse in which two or more people present and defend opposing points of view can be stimulating and enjoyable experiences. And, it's fine if your argument prevails. We must all stand for something. Even so, you should do your best to maintain courteous boundaries throughout the conversation, and don't get personal, petty, or cynical. It isn't necessary, and more importantly, it never works.

### If it ain't broke, don't fix it

With full awareness that you heard this admonition 11,382 times in your life by the time you were six: always say 'please' and 'thank you.' There are no words whose frequent use are more universally appreciated and desired, or whose absence when required can cause such distress.

### Always

Otto Von Bismark (1815-1898) was the first Chancellor of Germany. He took his country to war time and time again between 1860-1890. He once wrote, *“Be polite; even in a written declaration of war one should observe the rules of politeness.”*



While we certainly hope you never find yourself in Otto's shoes, it is fascinating to note how deeply the notion of courtesy infuses every human activity— even when declaring war.

### Conclusion

What makes life worth living? The fields of psychology and sociology typically respond to that question by saying that for most people, a meaningful life is the product of some combination of the values, principles, and activities that define their lives, including happiness, faith, work, play, and, especially, love. Each of these ingredients for a worthwhile life can be further broken down into a myriad of subsets. In the case of love, for example, there is romantic love, love for our family and children, and love for our country and our God.

For each of the major categories listed above, and for each and every permutation of that category into its various subsets, there are a few defining characteristics they all share in common.



One of those characteristics is courtesy.

To enjoy true happiness, most would agree, we must create and maintain positive interpersonal relationships based on respect and caring. Those relationships can only be forged and sustained within the boundaries of sincerity, genuine courtesy, and good manners.

Our faith lives, too, depend upon the many courtesies we extend not just to those with whom we share particular religious creeds and observances, but to all people of the earth who we are charged by our faith to serve. Most of the world's major faiths share in common the value of 'lifting' others up. That is an act that requires an attitude of humility, and which can only be accomplished through acts of courtesy and caring.

At work, our productivity is in large part a reflection of the energy and enthusiasm we contribute to our tasks, day in and day out. Knowing that our team members and bosses respect us, and that we are doing our work within a company or organizational culture in which polite behavior, good manners, clear boundaries, and common courtesies are the norm, makes it possible for us to do our best.

*"Respect for ourselves guides our morals; respect for others guides our manners"*

Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

Finally, play offers us opportunities to uncouple from the stresses of a busy, crowded and all too omnipresent world, and to experience the battery recharging benefits of some of life's simplest pleasures. Here, too, it is courtesy and good manners that make successful play possible. Whether it is simply playing by the rules of the game, extending invitations for others to join us, or accepting our losses as generously as we claim our victories, courtesy is the indispensable foundation for play.

In closing, let me thank you for reading, and for doing us the courtesy of investing your time and thoughtful contemplation of the role of this principle in your life.

I appreciate you!

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*Rod Zeeb is the founder and CEO of  
the Family Stewardship Center.*



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