

Business Manners, Time, and the Ethics of Information

In any professional environment, how people use time and information signals their character as clearly as their results do. Treating colleagues' time and expertise as disposable is not only bad manners; it is an ethical failure that damages relationships, reputations, and long-term opportunity.

What Business Manners Really Mean

Modern business etiquette goes beyond polite phrases and dress codes to three core behaviors. Professionals are expected to:

- Show up prepared and on time, signaling respect for others' schedules.
- Communicate clearly and concisely, avoiding unnecessary meetings, messages, or delays.
- Acknowledge and credit others' contributions instead of quietly absorbing them as their own.

When these basics are ignored, colleagues quickly interpret it as disrespect, even if the intent was simply "being busy" or "trying to learn."

When "Stealing Time for Info" Is Wrong

There is a clear difference between healthy professional curiosity and exploiting people as free consultants. "Stealing time for info" crosses the line when someone:

- Requests repeated "pick your brain" meetings with no clear agenda, outcome, or value in return.
- Uses interviews, networking calls, or informal chats to extract detailed plans or strategies without compensation or credit.
- Schedules long meetings when a short, focused call or email would have been sufficient.

In these situations, the asker is shifting cost and risk onto the other person while keeping all potential reward for themselves, which erodes trust and discourages future collaboration.

Keeping Yourself in Check

Self-management is the safeguard against becoming a "time thief" or an information exploiter, even unintentionally. Before asking for someone's time or insight, professionals can keep themselves in check by asking:

- **Is this necessary?** Can the answer be found with reasonable research before involving someone else?
- **Is there an exchange?** What can be offered in return—referrals, collaboration, visibility, future opportunities, or direct payment when appropriate?

- **Is the scope fair?** Am I asking for perspective and guidance, or for a full solution that should be a paid engagement?
- **Have I honored past help?** Did I follow up, credit them, or update them on outcomes when their input made a difference?

These questions act as an internal compliance check, aligning ambition with integrity and respect.

Reward, Reciprocity, and Long-Term Reputation

In healthy business ecosystems, information and access are rarely one-way streets for long. People who consistently respect time, reward contribution, and operate transparently tend to:

- Attract higher-quality relationships and referrals because others feel safe sharing ideas with them.
- Build a reputation for **fairness**, which becomes a strategic asset when deals, partnerships, and leadership roles are on the table.

Those who treat every interaction as an extraction opportunity often enjoy short-term gains but pay for it with closed doors and damaged credibility over time.