MANNERS

Faux pas with a fork

MBA students learn how to avoid embarrassment, SUE BOWNESS writes

Good manners often pass under the radar, but etiquette blunders are the stuff of legend. Canadian business schools have started offering "soft skills" training aimed at making bungled business lunches and networking faux pas a thing of the past.

Etiquette training has been established for quite a few years at American business schools, but Canadian MBA programs are just now catching up, says Connie Sturgess, founder of the Vancouver-based Western School of Protocol.

"The etiquette industry is more established in the U.S. and a newer concept in Canada," she says.

Ms. Sturgess facilitates etiquette training for MBA students at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, where popular topics are international protocol, networking and conversation skills -- and especially dining etiquette.

"Like many of the programs now available, we cover primarily American and continental style of dining, which goes way beyond holding the knife and fork," she says.

Training starts with a lecture on the art of cutlery and other topics, followed by a formal four-course dinner at a local hotel that allows students to practice their newly mastered social graces.

"Throughout time people have judged each other through manners -- in a business situation, table manners can be a clincher," Ms. Sturgess says. "You may know how to give a firm handshake and give good eye contact and carry on a conversation, but even top executives will sit down and be confused at the table because it's not something they've devoted much time to."

A lot of Sauder's soft-skills workshops are in response to feedback the school has received from interviewers about where students could improve, says Anne DeWolfe, the associate dean who hired Ms. Sturgess to facilitate the training.

"Anything we can do to help with the soft skills, the business community likes it -- they want to hire graduates who can entertain clients," Ms. DeWolfe says.
The training is particularly helpful to the school's large population of international students, she says. "Etiquette rules are different in different countries, so this is a way to let everyone know if they're doing business in a North American setting these are the rules we use."

Good etiquette training is an essential complement to academics, says Adeodata Czink, another etiquette specialist.

"People may have the skills to get high marks but absolutely no table manners at all, and that will set them back," she says.

Ms. Czink, who grew up in a diplomatic community, started her Toronto-based company called Business of Manners to facilitate workshops on etiquette. She has done workshops at McMaster's DeGroote School of Business, the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivey School of Business and the Schulich School of Business at York University.

Her "meals and manners" sessions feature a formal dinner where students practice toasts as well as mingling sessions in which they carry out the art of small talk.

Here are a few etiquette tips from Ms. Czink:

■ At the dinner table, put your napkin on your lap while eating and loosely to the left side of your plate when finished.
■ Don't start eating or drinking until your host does.
■ When networking, always introduce yourself with both your first and last names.
■ When exchanging business cards, take time to look at the other person's card before you put it away. If someone presents a card with two hands, receive it the same way.
■ When taking international trips, research the country's etiquette before you leave.

Many schools are looking to expand their soft-skills offerings.

At the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, an etiquette dinner facilitated by Leanne Pepper, general manager of the university's Faculty Club, has been a regular feature for a few years. This year the school expanded the dinner to include a networking session, and it was well received, says Lynda Paterson of Rotman's MBA Corporate Connections Centre.

Today's students are asking for networking sessions that are as close to real life as possible, says Jennifer McCleary, director of the Centre for Business Career Development at DeGroote, which has been offering etiquette training, dress-for-success events and networking opportunities for a few years.

"It makes them feel uncomfortable because they have to demonstrate that level of professionalism in a live setting. But in hindsight that is in fact where they learn the most," Ms. McCleary says.

An MBA grad herself, she can appreciate the difference that etiquette training makes. "We didn't have it when I graduated in the late eighties, and we definitely would have benefited," she says.

Ms. McCleary is working to provide other opportunities based on feedback from students and the business community, including one that would see alumni from a specific graduating year return to network with the senior MBA class.

"For [MBA students] to effectively present their brand as a business professional they need to confidently mix and mingle, introduce themselves to someone they've never met before," Ms. McCleary says. "It is a key component as a business professional to have this skill as part of their MBA experience and curriculum."

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