

# RULES OF ETIQUETTE

## ADDRESSING ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS THROUGH CREATING ETIQUETTE AWARENESS



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One of the key objectives in creating an equitable and inclusive culture is 'normalising' diversity. The process begins with transforming inbred perceptions that people hold to a point where opportunities are afforded to everyone based on their merit rather than misguided judgements founded on myths and stereotypes.

However, a critical component of diversity is disability, and when it comes to 'normalising' disability, there is still a long road to travel. The reality is, disability as a form of diversity remains primarily excluded from mainstream society. The consequence of this reflects in the awkwardness displayed when the topic of disability enters a conversation both in the workplace and in society alike.

As many are unsure as to the 'Rules of Etiquette' surrounding disability, their approach and behaviour are driven by inherent stereotypes that reinforce attitudinal barriers. The first step towards breaking down attitudinal barriers is to highlight the stereotypes that underpin such behaviour into perspective openly. The next step is creating awareness about the 'Rules of Etiquette' to guide comfortable engagement with people with a disability.

### Commonly held societal stereotypes surrounding 'disability' include:

#### Objects of pity

In society, there is a tendency to feel sorry for people with a disability. This often leads to patronising behaviour that infringes on opportunities, as it detracts from a person's ability to perform.

"Pity puts a disability before a person. Doing this shifts the focus from a person's ability to be a productive member of society. Remember that every person, irrespective of their makeup, is a resource."

#### Objects of 'inspiration'

There is generally a low expectation that people with a disability will lead a productive life. Therefore, when people with a disability get on with their life, they are labelled 'brave' or 'inspiring', but all they have done is adapt their approach to life, in order to be a productive part of society.

"This demeaning labelling tends to discredit those who are genuinely doing something inspiring!"

## Cultural Ignorance

There are many myths and culturally-influenced explanations as to why someone has a disability. For example, some view disability as a form of 'punishment' for doing something wrong, some attribute it to evil forces, yet for others, it is a realisation of how lucky they are.

"Like ignorance, disability is a part of the human makeup – in fact, it is quite 'normal' in all species. Remember 'disability' is not exceptional, and judgement cannot thus be placed on those who have a disability. What is exceptional, is realising this!"

## The 'lesser' citizen

People with a disability are often placed in 'special' categories where they are excluded from opportunities and perceived as 'second-class citizens' who require charity.

"The days of classifying people based on specific traits, in this country, are long gone. People with a disability deserve equal, not 'special', access to society."

## The 'Rules of Etiquette'

Although disability is a form of diversity, people with a disability have primarily been segregated from mainstream South African society. This lack of inclusion, in many cases, turns disability into the 'elephant in the room' – the topic to be 'whispered'. The result is that many people lack the confidence to engage with people with a disability out of a fear of offending them.

"First and foremost, ignoring or avoiding people with a disability tends to be more offensive than the occasional etiquette slip up. The result of ignoring the elephant in the room is exclusion and isolation. Familiarising oneself with the 'Rules of Etiquette' to confidently engage with people with a disability will organically break down attitudinal barriers."

## The 'special treatment' backlash

Situations occur where the value of a person with a disability in the workplace is diminished. This perception stems from 'Reasonable Accommodation' measures being viewed as special treatment or an unfair advantage.

"Put plainly, Reasonable Accommodation levels the playing field; it promotes equal opportunity. The purpose of 'Reasonable Accommodation' is to support the inherent function of a particular job and not to offer unfair or undue privileges."

## Flying under the radar

Many people living with 'invisible' disabilities - those that are not apparent at first glance - do not acknowledge their disability. In many cases, disability is not disclosed to an employer, due to the fear of reprisals and discrimination. Worse still, the person with an invisible disability may have a biased view on disability and would therefore not like to be labelled as such.

"In the workplace specifically, many disabilities are not disclosed until disciplinary action is underway due to a lack of Reasonable Accommodation support. Unfortunately, by this stage, relationships have more than likely broken down to the point of no return. Lack of disclosure, more often than not, stems from an environment that subconsciously projects attitudinal barriers towards disability and deems reasonable accommodation as special treatment."

Unfortunately for people with a disability, the consequences of attitudinal barriers reflect in society at large. Whether a person with a disability becomes the object of pity rather than value, or is referred to in an angry insult that insinuates a disability; for example "Are you mental?" or "Do it yourself, what is wrong with your legs?" or "What, are you stupid?" Apart from these examples, an attitudinal barrier can be as simple as not taking into account that a delegate with a disability, who is arriving at a conference, may not have access.

While our labour and constitutional laws support equal opportunities, the reality is that people with a disability are often relegated to low-skilled and low-paid jobs. There is little real investment in their training or development to enable them to reach their full potential.

What is needed for the benefit of us all is an ongoing campaign to eradicate attitudinal barriers by embracing disability as part of our diversity. A first step to building a culture of mutual comfort, respect and appreciation is being familiar with the 'Rules of Etiquette'.



## What follows are a few helpful points to guide everyone in comfortably interacting with people with a disability.

### ① The Mindset

Take into account that people living with a disability do just that; they live. They do not by default endure, suffer or live with permanent hardship any more or less than people without a disability. Most have long come to terms with their disability. Remember the law deems everyone equal with respect to gender, status, rights and opportunities. When either addressing or referring to a person with a disability, always put the person before the disability. For example, Joe Soap is a wheelchair user, or Joe Soap has Autism.

### ② Don't invade someone's personal space

In my experience as a wheelchair user, it astounds me how often complete strangers approach me and ask "What happened to you?" Consider that people acquire their disability in different ways. In some circumstances, trauma may be the result. Therefore, take cognisance that they may not feel comfortable sharing this information with a stranger. However, in workplace situations, it is fine to inquire about the functional impact of a disability in relation to the job at hand, as a means of exploring reasonable accommodation requirements. In a nutshell, focus on the functional impact of the position, rather than the person's 'journey'.

### ③ Empathy not sympathy

The key to equitable treatment is 'empathy', not 'sympathy'. It is important to understand the dynamics of a person's world when exploring how best to include them. This insight will provide an appreciation of the barriers that must be addressed, however, such engagements must not result in sympathy or inspiration. Remember everyone has challenges to manage; living with a disability is just one such challenge.

### ④ No Pity Party

During an engagement with a person with a disability, never patronise them by using that 'pity' tone. Never throw terms such as 'ag shame' into the conversation, especially when such terms are not relevant to the discussion at hand. Engage as equals.

### ⑤ Ask then assist

Never feel nervous about offering assistance to a person with a disability, as it is a good neighbourly gesture. Should your offer be rejected, do not feel bad, but move on. However, if your offer is accepted, ask how best you can assist rather than taking the lead.

### ⑥ Talk to the source

Many make the mistake of talking over people with a disability, especially when they have a companion. Engage directly with the person; do not focus your attention on their companion. This includes situations when a person with a disability has to communicate through a companion or interpreter.

An example is engaging with someone from the Deaf community who has a sign language interpreter. The interpreter is the verbal vessel only. Always remain engaged with the person.

### ⑦ Be real

If a person has a speech impairment, never pretend to understand what they are saying if, in fact, you do not. Instead, ask the person to repeat their message, as it will lead to better communication and mutual respect. Stay relaxed and engaged; don't feel embarrassed. After all, would you not extend the same courtesy to someone with a strong accent? This situation is no different in terms of etiquette.

### ⑧ Remember that all people are unique

Some people are confident; others are not; some are ambitious, others not; some are easy to get along with, others not. The same applies to people with a disability. Take care to judge people on their merits, not on specific stereotypes. I have often heard the comment "people with a disability are hard working and increase productivity because they are happy to be working". This is odd, to say the least, as I have met some very lazy people with a disability, just like I have met very productive ones. Beware not to generalise!

Above all, remember that there is a person with a personality, not a disability, in front of you. If you feel that you have done something offensive, make light of the situation and be open about the fact that you may not be entirely familiar with the 'Rules of Etiquette'. By the same token, if a person with a disability offends you, address this situation as you always would. Get over it quickly, and move on with the conversation at hand and continue to engage.

### ⑨ It is about accessibility

Allocated facilities such as bathrooms or parking are there to ensure accessibility for people with a disability. Therefore, when referring to them, refrain from using the terms 'disabled parking' or 'disabled bathroom'. Look at these statements in context; for example, a disabled bathroom would be a challenge for anyone.

As such facilities are allocated to promote accessibility, the first Rule of Etiquette is not to use them for your convenience, but allow them to be accessible to people with a disability.

Share the 'Rules of Etiquette' with those around you. Create awareness around disability diversity to encourage it. Be confident when engaging with people with a disability and, most importantly, have the strength to address attitudinal barriers with your peers.

On a final note, it is worth remembering that around 15% of the world's population live with a disability, most of whom were not born with one, but instead acquired it at some point in their life's journey. Disability is one form of diversity, which anyone can join in a matter of seconds. In fact, every person will be faced with a disability at some stage in their life, either directly or indirectly. Perhaps a point to ponder?

Images by: Mutua Matheka