

Walk the Walk: Ten High Standards of Behavior Women in Male-Dominated Industries Should Always Follow

By Roxanne Rivera

When you were growing up it is likely that at one point or another your mother or another female relative instructed you to “act like a lady” for a certain event or meeting with a respected person. Her goal was to ensure that you gave others the respect they deserved and invoked them to respect you. Hopefully you learned this lesson as a young girl, because “acting like a lady” is very important in business.

That’s right. When you act like a lady you get respect, and when you get respect people will want to work with you. This is extremely important for women working in male-dominated industries. When a woman conducts herself with a high standard of proper behavior, the men she interacts with will feel flattered and respected. And guess what happens? They become easier to work with and more open to what we have to say.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, a lady is a well-mannered and considerate woman with high standards of proper behavior. What exactly are these high standards of behavior? Here are ten examples that will help you gain respect from men and women alike.

1. Do not ever, ever, ever, even if you are tempted to do so, curse. Words can pack a powerful punch. I used the F word exactly one time in 22 years. I used it in a conversation with my business partner when I was exasperated beyond anything I had ever felt. It was 100% effective and accomplished what I wanted. Why? It had so much impact because I had never used it before, and I probably never will again. Women might think that using curse words will cause their male colleagues to view them as having moxy. In actuality your male colleagues will respect you more if you avoid the use of such words.

2. Do not shriek, yell, or scream at anytime. The only time a lady should shriek, yell, or scream is when you, your computer, or the building is on fire. Negative motivation does not work, therefore should never be used. Yelling is self-indulgent and spoiled behavior, so I always left it to the men. If you have a problem with a colleague, speak softly and slowly, but firmly. Handle any problems professionally and with respect for the other person’s humanity. I’ve always found that calmly explaining a problem I’ve had in a given situation was much more effective than screaming about why I am angry.

3. Dress appropriately. Oscar Wilde said, “I can resist anything, except temptation.” Do not dress in a tempting manner. This does not mean dress like a man. It simply means to avoid skirts that are too short and tops that reveal cleavage. I have always dressed in an

extremely feminine manner. The fact that I worked in the construction industry did not prevent me from wearing high heels and dresses. Quite frankly, I think that the fact that I did dress in a feminine manner suited me. But I was never over the top. It is important to always dress in a way that commands respect, and that allows you to be taken seriously and judged on your merits—not on your looks.

4. Be considerate. In this day and age, simple kind consideration is almost considered gauche. But, being considerate of men's feelings is crucial to being a lady. All of the women I interviewed said that one of the most surprising things that they have learned about men is how vulnerable they are. Men do have feelings and although they go to great pains to hide them, be assured that they are there. Ask how their families are, ask how they are feeling. They may not give you the answer you want or they may be short, but your consideration will be remembered.

5. Expect respect. If you recognize your own power and assume that you are being heard and respected, you will be. Always respect yourself first. When you send that message out, it will be returned to you. We tend to challenge ourselves too much. If you don't have confidence in your power and ability, then how can you expect your male colleagues to do so? Remember that how you feel about yourself directly impacts your ability to gain and retain respect. Always be confident and expect respect.

6. Have excellent manners. Gathering with your colleagues for the purpose of sharing food is one of the cornerstones of business. Table manners say a lot about who you are. Ladies always know how to conduct themselves in a social gathering. When I was a child, my mother sent me to an etiquette class. This was in the late 1960s and to this day, I use everything that I was taught. I know which fork to use; I know how to sit; and I know the proper way to stand. I have been on many advisory committees, many boards, and many commissions. My ability to handle myself with all sorts of people and to have impeccable manners has been invaluable. Following the rules of etiquette shows the people around you that you respect them, and you'll find that they will repay you with their respect.

7. Know how to conduct a meeting. This is probably the most important piece of advice you'll hear. I know so many dynamic women who completely fall apart when being faced with the task of conducting a meeting. If you are going to be successful and excel in a man's world, knowing how to conduct a meeting is essential. Poorly run meetings waste the time of their participants and certainly don't paint the meeting leader in a very good light. If you are having trouble at meetings, I recommend that you buy *Robert's Rules of Order*. They work in every environment and will help you to run a gracious and efficient meeting. You will be more respected and more admired if you can do so.

8. Know when to talk and when to shut up. Studies have shown that contrary to popular belief, *men* actually speak more than women in a business setting. Evidence shows that men dominate talking time in committee meetings, staff meetings, seminars, and task-oriented decision groups. One of the reasons that men dominate speaking in formal settings is because they tend to equate this behavior to status and power. Women, on the other hand, tend to want to make social connections and develop and reinforce friendships. Therefore, women are more willing than men to talk in a relaxed social

context. If you want to not only survive and thrive in a male-dominated field, you need to turn this tendency around. You must speak up more in those meetings and keep the social talking to a minimum. Make an effort to give quality contributions and ask questions. Participate in an active way and you will be viewed as a valuable member of the group.

9. Always be on time. I have many very successful women friends who are always late. I have just as many successful male friends who are always on time. What does being on time have to do with being a lady? Being late to an appointment, a luncheon, or a meeting is tantamount to saying to the person or people you are meeting that their time is not as important as yours. This is the ultimate display of bad manners. Being late damages your reputation in a male-dominated workplace, so if you want to be taken seriously and have your colleagues know that you respect them, you must be prompt.

10. Know when to say no. There is an art to saying “No.” I never wanted to say no in my career, because I never wanted to be perceived as incompetent or uncooperative. I also wanted my colleagues to think that I could do it all. Unfortunately, “doing it all” usually ends in you being stressed out, over-extended, and unable to give the right attention to what you need to accomplish on a daily basis. I came to realize that my inability to say no to colleagues or customers was really an inability to stick up for myself. I was showing a lack of assertiveness, not a quality a woman in a male-dominated industry wants to be lacking. When your plate is full and you know that you cannot take on anything additional, there is nothing wrong with saying no. It is better to say no than to run the risk of not being able to give a project the attention it needs to be a success.

Being a lady in a business setting is not about trying to fit into the stereotypes of what women should be or how women should act. It is all about carrying yourself in a way that forces men and other women to respect you. If you aren't giving men any reason to look down on you or think that you don't have what it takes to be a success in their industry, then they will have no choice but to respect you and give you a chance to prove yourself. If you follow these high standards of behavior, you can't go wrong. Not only will the people in your industry respect you, but you will have every reason to respect yourself.