

Politeness and its role in the communication culture

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Abstract:

„If you cannot be good, we should at least try to be polite” said N. Steinhardt in his Journal of happiness, but we have tried to prove that the idea of politeness is deeply related to the historical context.

The article also analyses the tendencies of the Romanian public discourses in relation to other European and non- European habits of communication. The conclusion of this study is that politeness is deeply related to the definition the cultural identity.

“If we cannot be good, we should at least try to be polite” N. Steinhardt (“Journal of Happiness”)

Key words: inter-human relations, norms, behaviors, formalism.

The intent of providing managers and assistant managers with rules and recommendations aiming to an agreeable organizational behavior, as well as to efficient organizational communication occurred concomitantly with the extension of the globalization process. Cultures overlapped, or cultural norms were given up to.

Strictly referring to the organizational management aspect, the profit intended by any entrepreneur can be also ensured or maximized by holding and using adequate behavior, which unfortunately is not always

a common conduct. The series initiated in this issue of the magazine aims to enrich the baggage of culturally significant managerial knowledge by means of updating the perfume of past eras (also full of economic facts and acts), but also by suggestions to young people – less preoccupied by the circumstances of inter-human relations and more dependant on being successful in their activity, especially in terms of money.

Our becoming members of the European Union also raises behavior and good manners issues, so that regardless if we are to

travel in Europe as simple tourists or as businessmen, we must know these norms, we must prove abilities for identifying and understanding cultural phenomena, both in respect with existent reactions and behaviors, and in respect with the needs for change in the global economy context, in order to avoid embarrassing situations.

According to the DEX (Explanatory Romanian Dictionary) the following definitions (senses) of politeness exist:

- *ceremonial salute performed by bending one's bust and knees, bound as a sign of respect;*
- *respect, veneration, consideration, esteem;*

I'll refer to a few aspects regarding politeness – as an expression manner, involving respect, consideration, esteem, both in verbal and written communication.

Politeness actually appeared as a sign of social statute and it meant a way of individual identification. Identity is established in the polite-impolite rapport.

Politeness and civilization are the ways in which those identities are structured in the communication process. Hence the permanent references to polite discourse.

In time, the modification is noticed of the polite-impolite rapport, and actually of the conditions in which politeness is defined.

Socially and worldwide practiced usages have been in a continuous evolution. Politeness *historicity* can be referred to, the fact that politeness and behavior are not only influenced by time's passing by, by generations' evolution, by the influence of mass media and by the development of science and technology, but also by political and juridical beliefs specific to each social development phase.

In his paper *Le protocole et les usages*, Jean

Serres stated that two tendencies can manifest: on one hand those tending to conserve old habits and practices, impregnated by time in people's behavior, and on the other hand those who intend to replace these practices by new ones, adapted to the present. Usages represent unwritten law of social life, said the same authors, as they involve moral behavior of those who mutually agree upon them. Due to such, people learn to live without giving up their own freedom. The origins of usages in the human behavior lay in people's concern for ritualizing their social existence. This concern has most times been characterized as bourgeois, because it represented the distinctive mark of the bourgeoisie in France, in our country and in other countries. It obliges the one living it to behavioral *refreshing*.

It is of common knowledge the fact that after the Dark Ages and even after the Renaissance, the peak of education and behavior rules was reached at the Sun King's court, Versailles. Today, we refer to "etiquette" rules due to the chief gardener of Louis XIV. Desperate that the nobles were ruining his flower beds and lawn at Versailles, he asked His Majesty to issue a decree for compliance with the "etiquettes" (labels) in the park. Thus, the term "etiquette" became to designate the set of well manner rules, remaining in time in the current language. However, there is a long way from the labels in Louis XIV time and until today, which some have taken running or going around, and along with new social contexts new dilemma also occurred regarding social behavior.

In his book, *Protocol – communication tool*, L. Dussault underlined that in the monarchic regimes the role of "etiquette" consisted in serving as differentiation method between the owner of the royal dignity, no

bles, themselves holding some granted power and the common people on which the first mentioned exercised their authority. During that period, for the king's suite (nobles or courtiers) it was an act of reverence and rising to be able to participate to the monarch's waking up or his toilet, to provide him with services which if provided to other persons would have been regarded as humiliating.

In the 12th century, says George Duby in his book *The Ladies in the 12th Century* it was polite for church clerks to write to a lady (in the high society) in Latin, by using the most severe rhetoric rules, as – he says – those epistles (small lectures) were not written to send confidences, but to be read before the entire family or even in different houses; words were public; it was polite to receive a letter copied from a collection, so without the author's subjective contribution. Letters were gathered in collections and placed next to classics on library shelves. Today, when accent is placed more and more on personalizing the letters, such would seem totally impolite.

Writing, the exchange of commercial information, represents ever since the 13th century one of the exercised techniques of the Italians' commercial success. The purely private letters were added to the commercial ones, so the border between public and private was not too simple to establish. In order to obtain the needed support, most claimants would use a warm tone, and sometimes even the vocabulary of private relations, hoping to create by their affectionate deference, the influence that might morally constrain the addressee to intervene.

Thus, we can find formulas used in the 15th century commercial correspondence, such as *maggiore*, as homage to superiority.

Deference (not without flattering) follows a crescendo, with *magnifico*, *carissimo*, to which there could be also added *come fratello* (between equals), or *come padre* from inferiors to superiors, in expressions like: *waiting from you like from a father... or asking you like a father...*

Imagine how it would be today in the correspondence between two business partners or between a citizen and a public official to see such formulas being used.

The objective of today's formalism, specific to correspondence, is to appropriately inform the addressee and to ease the text's reading. Logic, easily to apply rules, allow for a large amount of information to be transmitted by few words: Who is writing? When did he write? Having what capacity? What rapport does he establish with me? How does he consider me?... It is true that in this area some tradition still coexist which are divergent without being really contradictory; often, the used words make all the difference.

Europe, for instance, is the most ceremonial, the more if the persons who write to each other are on a higher hierarchical level. Politeness formulas exist which are specific to a particular environment: monarchy, high level church faces, and to some extent justice clerks, army and diplomacy.

In North America many of the sophisticated formulas have been abandoned, especially when sending a highly obedient message. Expression is much more direct, less reverential.

Indeed, it is highly possible for the wording to be correct from a protocol standpoint and in the same time extremely simple. In this case, as well as in public speaking, language abuses sound false.

In correspondence, we used to apply the

indented paragraphs format (as in the French model), but lately there can be noticed that in writing letters to be send within the country, our managers tend to adopt either the French model or, more and more frequently, the American one, meaning the block form, which represents a more economic formula, yet which somehow looses from its refinement and does not allow the reader to take pauses whilst perusing the letter – which is also, in a way, a matter of reverence.

The most used politeness (addressing) formula is *Mister* or *Madam*, followed by the title of the position (Romanian language relevant examples: *Mister Director*, *Mister Minister*, *Madam Judge* etc.). Also, more familiar formulas are used, which is not a sign of impoliteness, but on the contrary, they mark a reverential style. For instance, in the correspondence between two equals from a hierarchical stand point but who know each other well, to the actual appellative there can be also added *dear colleague* (Romanian language relevant examples: *Mister Rector*, *Dear Colleague* or *Mister Doctor*, *Dear Colleague*).

The tendency is more and more obvious of borrowing from English language the addressing and closing formulas, which are not specific to our country (For instance: the English addressing formula *Dear Sir*, as well as closing formulas such as: *yours sincerely*).

The same excessive familiarity, coming from the American model, is present in the advertising discourse of some companies or mass-media institutions, addressing to the public on the 2nd person, singular. For instance in the Romanian language relevant examples (addressing to a single individual): *You make the future*, or in constructions such as *discover*, *dream*, *type* or *Tvr 1 and Timisoara Bishopric asks you to donate....* Many say that it

is not a discourse adequate to their expectations, that the mentioned construction don't fit them, because the Romanian communicational culture is still marked by the politeness rigors.

In the category of borrowed gestures, considered by some as impolite there could be also included the phone holds, for which some companies use background music.

In some cultures these gestures could represent sign of politeness, whilst in other they might not. We agree that the numerous international contacts stimulate the individual's desire of synchronizing with the international time. Prudence is however the one which should be at all times kept in one's attention, because a country's usages present differences compared to other countries and the risk can exist for an individual willing to internationalize himself to lose his national coordinates, his individuality.

The tendency is towards excessive familiarity, which will probably lead in time to a come back of the politeness in the communicational discourse; history has proven that even in respect with behavior rules, as well as in other environment, the *fashion* phenomenon exists.

At the moment of large historical changes, when a particular social order is replaced by another, there can be noticed a form of rejection of the recognized politeness forms. The French Revolution is relevant in this respect. *You* (plural) was replaced by *you* (singular), and *citizen* became everyone's name. Royal and nobles titles were abolished, all in order to serve the equality principle, sacred for the French revolution.

The former totalitarian regime in our country allows another relevant example, namely the change of the addressing form

Mister with *Comrade*, regardless if the referee was member of the communist party or not.

The phenomenon of "rejecting" the past is equality obvious on the ideas, conceptual level, and also of the protocol formalism.

Thus, spontaneous gesture is considered (by many young people nowadays) authentic, whilst formalism, because it is the result of reflections, is regarded as an instrument for inter-human relations constraint.

In the business relations context, amongst the assistant manager's or manager's duties, who by their position have to contribute to establishing interpersonal relations, there are also to know, understand and comply with protocol rules which add to those of behavior and common conduct. Their correct application in certain situations might help them avoid mistakes or blunders.

Today, when automatics has become an integrant part in our life, when men and women are colleagues (more and more women

occupy decisional positions), when many young people, businessmen eat fast-food, these behavior prerequisites might seem old-fashioned, but it would be a large mistake not to pay them the right attention.

Even though most people around us don't care about good manners, we will be appreciated if we behave as the rules ask, and professional satisfactions won't hesitate to appear.

We live at the beginning of the 21st century, in an agitated world, a world in which communications technologies have developed explosively, so that many ask themselves if there is still a point in caring about reverence, politeness, good manners, if such are not useless. The answer is definite: good manners are part of our life, they maintain the harmony between us and the environment and they inevitably contribute to the civilization progress.

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