

# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS ETIQUETTE?

What is etiquette and why do I think it's a subject important enough about which to write a book? Etiquette is a set of manners coupled with a code of conduct. Manners are the way we treat others, conduct is how we act in public and private. I feel many have lost basic manners toward each other and that the conduct of some young black men is poor. We see repeatedly on our televisions, hear on the radio, and read in newspapers about behavior that would have been unthinkable twenty or thirty years ago. Unfortunately, instead of being ashamed or remorseful about bad behavior, today's young black man is often proud of his conduct. For many, shooting or stabbing someone is seen as a desired thing to do to gain a "reputation" or "street credibility". Having been shot or stabbed gives one a tough persona that many young men covet. Being thought of as a thug, hoodlum, or hustler is proof that one has arrived. Time spent in jail or prison is irrefutable evidence that a young black man has a graduate degree from the streets.

Some would say “So what’s the problem?” The problem is this behavior has had a devastating affect on black communities across America. Every urban city has a black ghetto where young black men hold residents hostage with their actions. Muggings, rapes, robberies, and shootings have become far too common and cause many residents to live behind barred windows and multi-locked doors. Drug dealers, pimps, and hustlers are so prevalent that some young black boys grow up seeking to emulate their destructive lifestyles. Black men who attend school or work hard at normal jobs are often scoffed at or accused of “acting white”. How did we get here?

Etiquette is a very simple concept. It simply means that a person is expected to conduct himself in a manner consistent with those around him. For example, when I was in the marching band in college, we were expected to arrive on game day in our uniforms. Each person’s uniform had to be clean, have all parts correctly mounted on it, and our shoes had to be shined. This was considered the proper uniform. A failure to have all parts of the uniform in place, dirty or wrinkled led to punishment by our band director.

Punishment could range from a simple verbal reprimand in front of the whole band to being denied the chance to march at the game. It was hard for some band members to understand, but the reason for the rules was to ensure that the entire band looked good and uniform in appearance.

The problem that many black men have is that there isn't a positive role model, like my band director, around to tell them that their uniform is wrinkled. By that, I mean someone to say what they are wearing isn't appropriate, or that their language or behavior is out of order. Let's look at a few examples.

Most people have seen an awards show on television. Many people have attended awards programs for athletics, education, or other honors. Since an awards program or show is a special event, people who attend are required to wear special clothing. The name of the clothing worn at these special events is formal wear. Formal wear is also worn by the members of a bridal party, guests at a high school prom, and members and guests of events such as an organization's annual fundraising banquet. It consists of a tuxedo and dress shoes for men, and an evening gown and dress shoes for women. It is a

serious breach of etiquette to see artists and guests at a hip hop awards show wearing jeans, sneakers, and baseball caps. Since the people wearing the jeans, sneakers, and baseball caps dress in similar clothing everyday, they either don't know that the awards show is a special event or they don't care. In either case, the event loses its special status because the attendees aren't following standard etiquette by dressing appropriately for this type of event.

Another example of a disregard for proper etiquette is the public use of profanity. Normal etiquette prohibits profanity wherever innocent ears might hear it. By innocent, I mean anyone you are not speaking to directly. If your friends curse at each other in ordinary conversation, that is their business. Each has a history of cursing and an expectation that cursing around one another is normal conduct. If, however, these friends are standing in the lobby of their church cursing, as is their custom, they have breached the standard etiquette of their environment. The same could be said for performers on that hip hop awards show who curse without thought of who could be tuning in. Everyone who turns to that television station isn't expecting to hear cursing as a form of entertainment. For

this reason, television and radio stations have a delay so that curse words can be removed before they are aired. As a man, one should know what the acceptable language for their environment is and act accordingly.

Finally, there is a standard of behavior depending on one's environment. In the wild, wild west that we see depicted on television and in the movies, there was very little in the way of a police presence or court system. Disputes were often solved by fist fights or gun battles. Whoever won the fight or gun battle was the victor and there really wasn't anyone to dispute the results. Today, we rely on the police to maintain order and the courts to sort out who is right or who is wrong. It is also assumed that citizens of the United States will conduct themselves in a lawful manner consistent with the need to maintain order. We have all seen in our viewing of the untamed west, a dangerous town where anything goes. The local sheriff was weak or had been killed by gun toting thugs, and the townspeople lived in fear. The town couldn't prosper because citizens struggled to survive under these conditions. No one could operate a store, a stable, or any other business knowing their money or goods would be taken at gun

point. They also wouldn't want to risk their lives crossing the town's streets if they knew a gun battle was likely to erupt. To put it mildly, most people wouldn't want to live in that town.

Yet, this is really no different than what happens in some black neighborhoods. Citizens sometimes see young black men engaged in the sale of illegal drugs right on the sidewalk. Cars and customers come and go making for a lucrative open air drug market. Remember, that we are striving to maintain the etiquette of this neighborhood. That means that as a community we can't allow this illegal behavior. The gun battles that inevitably occur as rivals seek to control this money making enterprise, endanger innocent citizens as well as the drug dealing participants. Likewise, the prostitution and theft that seem to accompany illegal drug activity, all combine to destroy the normal activities of a neighborhood.

These examples make it easy to see what happens when the normal code of conduct isn't followed. Young black men must know what constitutes standard etiquette and apply it to their lives. Time has shown us over and over what happens when black men ignore

society's customs. It is foolish not to learn from the mistakes of those men who have paid the cost of defying societal etiquette.

What are the mistakes that some black youth and men make?

I go into greater detail about the mistakes and their consequences in upcoming chapters. However, they can be as seemingly harmless as not finishing the work necessary to obtain a good education and thereby a good job. They can also be deadly as the wrong choices cost the lives of black youth in America daily.<sup>2</sup> The community suffers each time a Black man makes the wrong choice. The choice one makes has an effect on people in the neighborhood who may not even know the person who has impacted their lives. This is why one's actions are not to be taken lightly.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.chicagodefender.com/article-6484no-excuse-for-gun-violence.html](http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-6484no-excuse-for-gun-violence.html)