

Check Your Phone at the Door! Are You Disrespecting Your Coworkers?

By Fatimah Gilliam, CEO, The Azara Group

Nearly everyone has a cell phone. These devices can make our lives easier. They keep us connected to other people and send us continual information. However, there is a time to use them and when we should put them away.

We are all guilty of checking emails, sending text messages, and surfing the web when we were interacting with other people. People do this in meetings, on conference calls, and when grabbing lunch with colleagues. Sometimes we do it out of necessity, but often we do it out of a sense of self-importance.

Let us be honest about this practice. Most of the time it is rude, disrespectful, and annoying. People can tell when you are half listening to them, and they can literally see you pull out your mobile device when they are midsentence. Your behavior is inescapable.

It is time for more of us to start unplugging and reconnecting with people. Why? You could be sending signals that you do





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not intend — signals that could have negative repercussions on your professional advancement. When you offend people, they take it personally. They tend to remember and stop liking you.

So what messages are you sending when you do not fully engage with others and have your nose in your phone? What is that potential negative blowback from being unable to electronically disconnect?

1 Sending the Message — I'm Not Listening & You Aren't Important

Here is the bottom line — people want you to listen when they speak. They do not want to feel like they are talking to themselves. Also, your colleagues do not want to have to repeat themselves at a later time because you missed pertinent information. This wastes their time and is inefficient.

If you cannot actively listen and participate in key conversations, you are saying that the people around the table are not important to you. Your actions are indicating that your collective work is less important than what is in your phone, and that you lack self-awareness and "home training." You may not want people to assume you are narcissistic, but your actions by their very nature may indicate otherwise.

Therefore, if you are in a planning session at work and brainstorming your team's next big project, it is the perfect time to disconnect from your phone. Not only will you be perceived as being a more involved team player, but you will actually end up being just that — involved. Go figure!

2 Relationships Require Facetime — So Stop Showing People the Top of Your Head!

To build relationships with colleagues and clients, you actually need to show up and be present. We may live in a virtual world, but relationships need real facetime. There is no substitute for direct involvement and going beyond virtual experiences. Start living and working more in the moment.

You cannot build strong and lasting relationships if you only connect

with people virtually. You should strike while the iron is hot and connect with the people physically around you. If you are half engaged with someone else virtually while you have a live human being in front of you, it is a missed opportunity that you elected to squander.

Genuine human connection requires being mentally engaged and showing that you are a full participant in conversations. The best way to form strong relationships is to put the gadgets away so you can become an active listener in real time.

3 Whatever It Is, It Can Wait!

Unless someone is literally about to die, it is an emergency, or the company or a client relationship is on the verge of falling apart, those texts and emails can wait an hour or two. The world will not crumble if people have to wait a little longer to hear back from you because you are in a meeting. However, what will start to deteriorate is how you are perceived by your fellow team members when you cannot pay attention when others speak.

For those special instances when something truly is urgent that requires your immediate attention, you should alert your colleagues that you have a time-sensitive matter that you are handling simultaneously. This allows you to manage expectations. You should only check your phone periodically. Do not remain glued to your device checking and responding to messages every few minutes. You should only look for messages specifically relating to that urgent topic. Everything else can wait.

However, if you use this “urgency” excuse often, then people will catch onto you. They will believe this is simply how you always operate. Colleagues may become annoyed and think you are just rude and disrespectful. This will become part of your narrative and brand, and who they think you are.

Final Thoughts

While you may try to convince yourself that you can multitask, please do not fool yourself. You will end up doing two things poorly instead of one thing exceptionally well. At the end of the day, everyone wants to feel respected and heard. A good method to signal that you think what your coworkers have to say is important and that their time is valued is to check your cell phone at the door.

Not only will your bonds with your colleagues and clients grow, but you will be more engaged in what takes place around you. You will find that as you increasingly fully engage, it will pay positive dividends in your career and the relationships you develop.

If you resist change and are incapable of disconnecting, then ask yourself this — why would anyone want to invite you to the next client meeting or task you on the next major project if you are oblivious or indifferent to the impact that your phone etiquette and behavior has on the team?

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