

Soft Skills at Work: Take these five steps to build your reputation

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
Published 10/03/10

Are the actions you take every day reputation builders or reputation busters?

Consider what happens if you don't smile or fail to make eye contact while talking to a client. Or, conversely, what the reaction might be if you return a call quickly to someone who is not expecting such a prompt response. Suddenly a perception - either positive or negative - has been formed about you based on your action.

There are many such behaviors that build or hurt your reputation, and the smallest actions, even when they seem insignificant, can sometimes make the biggest impression. Read through the following questions to determine what you may be currently doing:

1. Do you use your computer while talking on the phone?

If the answer is yes, you can rest assured that the person on the end of the line can hear the clicking of the computer keys. Unless you are getting information for the caller or there is another relevant reason, this action can be distracting to him/her.

What might the person's reaction be? It could be one of irritation or feeling disrespected because your attention is not fully on the call.

While multi-tasking is prevalent today, listening carefully and fully participating when on the phone is a reputation builder.

2. Do you spell and pronounce people's names correctly?

I may be particularly sensitive to this question because of the number of times my name - Marcia - is misspelled and mispronounced. As you work with clients or customers, co-workers and employees, are you absolutely certain what they prefer? Is there a nickname they like, or one you should never use? Do you look at each e-mail you send, making sure the name is spelled correctly?

In their research, Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon, co-founders of Contacts Count which is a firm that teaches business and professional networking, have found that people do not spend enough time learning a name and teaching others theirs. In fact, they have determined that "97 percent of people say they have trouble remembering names."

They recommend taking the time to learn a name. Comment about the spelling and listen to how it is pronounced. People want their names said and spelled correctly. One mistake may be excused, but continually misspelling a name is an action that does not build your reputation.

3. Can people read your writing?

If you look at signatures on documents, it can be hard to decipher what the name actually is.

Even in this computer age, there are forms that need to be filled out by hand. If you scribble so that the letters and numbers are unclear, the person trying to read what you've written loses time. If you are asked to take notes from a conference that a co-worker will review, how is your handwriting? There may be a phone number, address, or other important information to pass along.

A big time waster occurs when a person has to track you down to find out what you've written. This does not help your reputation as someone who is accurate or competent.

4. Do you use your smart phone during meetings?

Look around the room during most meetings and you will see heads bowed as participants hide their smart phones under the table, or blatantly use them while a speaker is talking. To the person leading the meeting, these people seem disengaged. The leader may conclude that these participants are disorganized, haven't finished what they needed to do beforehand, or may not even want to be there. None of these reactions is desirable and they are reputation busters.

While acknowledging that many meetings are unproductive or unnecessary, paying attention and participating show respect and are a good way to build your reputation.

5. Do you return e-mails promptly?

I often hear businesspeople say they get 100-300 or more e-mails daily. One of the most powerful ways to build trust is to be responsive. I am not talking about replying to unsolicited sales e-mails, but rather, requests for information or assistance from clients or co-workers.

There are many recommendations about how quickly to return an e-mail. To demonstrate your reliability, I believe responses should be made in no more than 24 hours, and preferably by the end of the business day. The person requesting your help will then be able to move on, will likely feel gratitude, and have a favorable impression. This is certainly not possible for every e-mail and that is why flagging the most urgent is important so that you can respond in a timely manner.

The five small actions mentioned in this column are but a few of the behaviors people display on a regular basis. There is no doubt that they have an impact on others.

It is a good idea to take a look at what you do. Your reputation is at stake.

Marcia Hall, founder and principal of Reputation COUNTS, is a job readiness skills and business networking trainer, and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, a project of the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corp. dedicated to stressing the connection of soft skills to workplace success. E-mail her at marcia@reputationcounts.com

This column appeared in *The Capital* on October 3, 2010. It is a publication of the *Capital Gazette Newspapers* in Annapolis, Maryland. Marcia Hall writes the monthly column, *Soft Skills at Work*.

Copyright © 2010 [Capital Gazette Communications, Inc.](#), Annapolis MD USA