



Management Insight

Punctuality

Why it is more than the Courtesy of Kings

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Let's Talk About Punctuality

It is about time to do so and hardly anybody does anymore. What's wrong with people anyway? Punctuality seems to be a forgotten virtue - it sure is a neglected one.

Punctuality is a strange thing. Everybody knows what it is, understands the concept, and knows how to achieve it. And still ... still people keep failing. They keep showing up late with no or lame excuses. I do understand that one cannot be always on time. I accept that there are valid reasons for being late or completely missing an appointment.

What I do not understand is that people seem to have resigned to this behavior and – begrudgingly – accepted it. This is equally true for both, those who are late and those who show up on time, having to wait for the former.

Well, I do not. Never have and never will. Here is why you should not, either. Being punctual is of course a basic politeness in daily personal and professional life. Apart from that you do send a loud and clear message every time you are late. Think about it for a moment.

An Example

I organize a meeting by

- checking the attendants availability
- sending invitations early enough
- distributing the agenda
- making sure the meeting room is booked
- being there a bit early and prepare

Out of the invited people one shows up a few minutes early, one is right on time and you are five minutes late. What does this tell me?

It immediately shows that one third of the people I considered to be relevant for my meeting does not care, is not fully committed, is bad at managing their own time, or - and this is the best case - is too overloaded to actually contribute in any meaningful way.

Who would want to send such a message? I sure don't. So there are three main questions to be answered:

1. How do you react when people are late?
2. How do you make sure that people show up on time?
3. How do you prevent being late yourself?

How to React When People are Late

Your actual reaction will of course depend on several factors including your position relative to those of the meeting participants, a person's frequency of being late to meetings and whether or not a late-comer is a crucial element for the meeting you invited him for.

The one principal, which I uphold and which ignores these factors is that under no circumstances should a lack of punctuality be ignored or even accepted. This is a serious problem and as such needs to be addressed properly.

Below you can find several actions and measures I took in different situations when I had to deal with notoriously late employees, colleagues and superiors.

In any case I strongly recommend not to take any public actions. Rather talk to the "offender" privately. You can ask him to stay for a few more minutes after the meeting when the other participants have left or – if this is not possible – set up a separate encounter. Just do it fairly soon after the actual meeting.

Rather than barking at somebody for being late and asking publicly what is wrong with him, talk to the person privately. Do not blame her for being late.

State the facts as you see them

I noticed you being late/unprepared for the last meeting(s).

Sympathize

I know from my own experience that it is not always easy to be in time and prepared.

Offer help

Is there anything I can help you with in order to avoid this in the future? I found it helpful for myself to block 30 minutes before the actual meeting and focus on its preparation. Maybe this can also work for you.

The whole idea is to be assertive and not offensive or even aggressive. This approach usually works well as most people appreciate being talked to like an adult rather than being reprimanded like a child.

Being assertive does not mean to be soft or weak. Nor does it imply a hostile approach. It is based on reason and reasoning. For more details on assertive communication I strongly recommend the work of [Dale Carnegie](#).

It happens rarely that this approach does not result in success. If it does, stay positive in your methods and eventually apply some pressure to the notorious late-comer as outlined in the next paragraph.

How to Make Sure People Show Up on Time

Trick question. You cannot really make sure of that. But you can and should try several different approaches to that end. As always, start with yourself by giving them a fair chance to be on time:

- check your prospective participants availability
- send the invitation well in advance (as a rule of thumb I recommend at least two business days)
- include an agenda and location
- clarify your expectations for this meeting (share information, prepare or make a decision, etc.).

Once these formalities are out of the way it is of utmost importance to arrive a few minutes early yourself. The reason for this should be obvious:

You cannot reasonably expect people to do things that you are not prepared to do yourself. In other words: don't send anybody anywhere; lead the way and make them follow you.

If showing up late at meetings is not limited to specific individuals, but an organization-wide 'phenomenon', you need to work on your organizations culture and infuse it into your colleagues and employees. This is not only the job of people in management positions. Each and every member of an organization can and should do so.

How to be on Time

So far we assumed that you are the meeting organizer. What if you are a participant? Basically you follow the same idea – just from a different point of view.

- If the meeting invitation does not include the elements above, kindly ask the organizer for the missing information. Feel free to point out that you intend to contribute as much and as well as you possibly can and therefore need this information. It should be in the organizers best interest to help you with that.
- If you know that you cannot make it in time (or at all) notify the organizer immediately and give her a chance to reschedule accordingly.
- If the meeting agenda requires you to invest time and/or liaise with others in order to be properly prepared, plan for this time and don't make it a last-minute task.

Conclusion

There is much more to say and discuss on this subject. As always, I aim to keep these Management Insights concise and readable. In this case as in so many other situations I recommend keeping (a slightly watered down version of) the First Formulation of Immanuel Kants 'Categorical Imperative' in mind:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.

I say 'watered down' because our acts don't really need to be able to become universal laws – if we focus on making them applicable (without contradiction) in our respective organizations, we will do just fine.