



# CAMERON-BROOKS, INC.

## Professional Recruiters

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### **Roger's Tip of the Month**

**"How you treat a waiter says a lot about your leadership."**

I have often wondered why so many people are rude to waiters and waitresses in restaurants. The next time you are in a restaurant, pay attention to the way some people talk to the waitpersons, order them around as if they were servants, treat them with cold indifference or neglect to give them the common courtesy of calling them by name (despite the fact that they introduce themselves and wear a large name tag). Surprisingly, this happens too often with educated business people or leaders who should know a lot better.

This type of behavior can be referred to as situational professionalism. People who practice this have one set of manners/values when interacting with an important customer or senior leader and another set for use with a subordinate or "ordinary" person (like a waiter). They can turn on charm and professionalism when they feel the need and turn it off when they don't. Situational professionalism is a form of hypocrisy and a window into a person's leadership style and upward potential. A person who is nice to the boss but rude to others is not a nice person. It may not happen in the first few years on the job, but with time, this hypocrisy will rear its ugly head in the workplace and damage the person's credibility. It's just a matter of time.

I'm not promoting being falsely nice in all situations. Nobody likes a phony and there are valid times when a leader needs to give direct and honest feedback. I'm talking about situations where people treat others with cold indifference or with a lack of common courtesy because they can get away with it or just to fuel their own egos.

I recently read a story about Office Depot CEO Steve Odland. As a youth, while waiting tables in a high-end restaurant in Denver, he accidentally spilled a dessert on the expensive white gown of an obviously wealthy and important guest. Expecting to be shot on sight, he has never forgotten the woman's kind reaction. Although startled, she quickly regained her composure and told the teenage Odland in a reassuring voice that it was not his fault. Her reaction said a lot about her character. Years later, Odland still remembers her professionalism in this difficult situation.

In past years, I used to make a similar point to Junior Military Officers attending our Career Conferences. On the first day of the Conference, I always ate lunch with a group of young officers attending the Conference. While these officers were rarely overtly rude to any of the waiters, they never paid much attention to the wait staff during lunch. In the first big group session after lunch, I would approach some of the candidates who had been sitting at my table and offer them \$100 if they could remember the name of one of the waiters who served our table. In 40 years, I can only remember one time I had to pay out. The message is that indifference is another form of bad manners.

I assure you that companies are getting more sophisticated and creative about evaluating this type of professionalism during the interview process. Company hiring managers will seek opinions from everyone from the front desk clerk at a candidate's hotel to the limo driver, from the person who conducted the realtor tour to the receptionist at the front desk. After all, they know you are going to bring your A-game to the interview with the hiring manager, but how do you interact with all the people on the periphery? That says a lot about a person.

For some people, acting in a condescending or rude manner to someone like a waiter is a sign of power. It may work this way on TV shows, but I assure you that in the "real" world, enduring leaders don't rely on this type of behavior to fuel their egos. Instead, they treat all people around them with the same set of values – approachability,

understanding, respect, consistency, fairness, listening skills, and inner confidence. These are the characteristics of true leaders. They always have been.

The worst thing I have seen is when this type of behavior not only ruins workplace credibility, but also affects personal lives, friendships and families. We live in a busy world. If we are not careful, transactional and rude behavior can spill over into personal lives. Before you know it, you start treating a loved one the same way you treat the waiter in a restaurant. With time, bad habits can become pervasive.

In the end, manners are habits. Consistently treating others with professionalism is a habit that can be learned and unlearned. Whether a person is a Division Commander, CEO, plumber, soldier or gas station attendant, each one deserves the same kind of professional courtesy. Even in a bad situation (like a spilled dessert), a calm and professional response far outweighs a fly-off-the-handle reaction. It will endear people to you, earn their respect and loyalty, set the right example for people around you, and cement your credibility as a leader.

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