



She Gives Etiquette a Little Class

June 24, 2010
By Jessica Estepa
Roll Call Staff

If Alexandra Kovach could come up with a new word for etiquette, she would.

“It has a bad rap,” she said.

The certified consultant (she graduated from the Protocol School of Washington) thinks the scary “e” word comes down to one thing: being nice to people. Sure, a person should know which side the water cup is on, but that’s not nearly as important as making people comfortable.

That’s what she focuses on when she teaches etiquette classes, which include private lessons and regular dinners she hosts in partnership with the Caucus Room. During these events, groups of strangers come together to learn that manners matter and to ask a lot of questions about eating continental style and where the napkin goes when you leave the table.

After all, the code of civility was created for a reason. In his book on the rules of conduct, George Washington wrote about not spitting out the pits. Back then, it was common for the seeds of fruit to be in pies. The first president thought spitting out these seeds was rude behavior.

Fast-forward a couple centuries, and that’s the kind of commonsense thinking that Kovach likes to emphasize.

Here’s a more modern version of Washington’s advice, via Kovach: “The reason we chew with our mouths closed is because it’s uncomfortable for the person next to us.”

When Kovach first started these classes, she thought they would mostly target people who were fresh out of college and just starting their careers. But that hasn’t been the case.

“Sure, the 20-somethings come to the class, but a lot of executives come, too,” Kovach said. “They want to know what to do with their BlackBerry at dinner.”

The answer to that, she said, is simple. The advent of technology has changed the face of what most people consider socially acceptable. Just because people have smart phones doesn’t mean it’s now OK to text during dinner or take calls at the table, she said.

“A lot of the time, people are in their own bubbles, with their earphones and their cell phones out,” Kovach said. “We’ve forgotten what it’s like to interact, in both business and social situations.”

Businesswoman Linda Hillmer was hesitant about taking Kovach’s class. After starting her communications company in 2001, she found herself having several business lunches and dinners with clients and potential partners, and she realized she had questions about what to do and what not to do. But she hesitated in seeking out an etiquette class, which she imagined would be filled with a bunch of snobs.

Luckily, Kovach's class proved her wrong.

"It's like learning a new language," said Hillmer, 45. "There are certain rules that everyone knows exists, but very few people know what they are."

Hillmer's advice to social conduct newcomers: It's always BMW. Bread on the left. Meal in the center. Water on the right.

Kovach's approach focuses on the treatment of people and getting to know their comfort zones, which is something that Zejfa Jahic appreciates. Jahic, 26, works for the Graduate School International Institute, which hosts a State Department program. She often deals with people from different cultures, and as a German immigrant with an Indian husband, she understands that etiquette depends on where you're from.

"I grew up eating continental style, and my husband grew up eating with his hands," Jahic said. "Alexandra teaches you that it's important to know the guidelines, but it's more about being respectful than anything else."

Kovach offers lessons on a regular basis at the Caucus Room and in private settings. More information about Kovach's classes can be found at alexandracompany.com.

2010 © Roll Call Inc. All rights reserved.