

Few Things More Precious Than Time

Being on time and not cancelling meetings at the last minute are hallmarks of a professional.

A few years ago, a family member gifted my son with John Bridges' book "How To Be A Gentleman." It's full of advice, appropriate regardless of gender and metered out in a few sentences per topic, on handling a wide array of situations in which etiquette is important. There are tips on subjects such as how to use voicemail and smartphone cameras in an appropriate manner, how to make a dinner reservation, and when it is appropriate to pick one's nose in public (never). It also issues counsel on when it's OK to cancel a date with another person.

One morning few of years ago, my phone buzzed and I glanced down to see the name of the caller, my friend and business associate John. My initial reaction was one of cheerfulness. I always enjoy talking with John. Nanoseconds later, just before touching the little green icon that would accept John's call, the blood rushing out of my head, adrenaline coursing, I realized my mistake.

"John," I said when I answered the phone, "I'm so sorry. I missed our coffee date this morning. I didn't look at my calendar last night, and I have to admit that I totally spaced on our meeting. I feel terrible."

"A gentleman breaks a date only for reasons of sickness, death, or natural disaster."

And I did. There are few things more precious than a person's time, which he or she can never get back. Seconds, minutes and hours that, once consumed, are lost forever. Thanks to my carelessness with my calendar, I had wasted John's time and possibly sent an unintended message that he wasn't important to me.

I called the local bakery and arranged for a dozen cookies to be delivered to his office that afternoon along with a note apologizing again. When he called to thank me and let me off the hook, I told him again how terrible I felt. And I genuinely meant it.

About a year ago, I arrived at a local restaurant about five minutes early for a lunch meeting with another business leader. The restaurant fills up around lunchtime, so I secured a table for two, ordered an iced tea and waited for 15 minutes. The server refilled my iced tea. At the 25 minute mark, I ordered lunch. As I ate alone, I worried a bit that I had the date or location wrong. Midway through my meal, in response to a text message I had sent, my lunch date responded that he must have forgotten to write down our appointment. No

apology, no cookies, nothing. He just forgot.

Like many, I keep a busy schedule, and at certain times of the year, my calendar can be substantially full with business trips, lunch meetings, coffee appointments and family commitments 60 to 90 days out. During these seasons, I make an art of wedging in meetings based on moving

priorities and where, geographically, I might be during any given week. Once pinned on my calendar, I generally keep my commitments; even if something seemingly more important arises, rarely do I move an appointment, and only then with a sincere apology and plenty of notice.

Years ago, a mentor flattered me by sharing his observation that few people arrived at a meeting more prepared than I did. "You do your homework up front, and as a result you pretty much get whatever you want out of the meeting," he said. It was a great life lesson, and a practice I have tried to follow in the 25 years since. While this habit works for me, it also means that I invest significant time in preparation. Thus, when a meeting is cancelled at the last minute, not only am I interrupted by the cancellation, but the prep time I invested is lost as well.

In the last month, I have arrived early for two important meetings—ones in which I had invested significant time in preparation—only to be told that the person with whom I was to meet was unavailable. In each case, a surrogate sat through the meeting and promised to update the no-show.

In another instance, I received an email from an associate 30 minutes before the start of the meeting for which I had dedicated 60 minutes in preparation the evening before. The email simply stated, "Unfortunately, I have to cancel our appointment." I didn't wait around the office for the cookies to arrive.

"A gentleman breaks a date only for reasons of sickness, death, or natural disaster," Bridges writes in "How To Be A Gentleman." "If he must cancel his plans, he does so with as much warning as possible." While that standard might seem a bit extreme, it's not too far off the expectation I hold for myself.

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