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Personal Finance: Listen to Mom and get ahead

A Mother's Day reminder that the lessons your mom taught you apply to business too.

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Everybody has a story about why his mom is the best — the times she baked cookies for all your friends, how she faithfully sat in near-empty bleachers to cheer your losing team or comforted you when you were down.

I have those too, but the thing that I most appreciate about my mom is how she prepared me for life in the working world.

These were not the nurturing conversations of childhood. They were the frank discussions with her aspiring hippie daughter about how the world will judge you by the way you look and act.

When I wanted to wear jeans full of holes (now a fashion statement) and earrings that reached my shoulder blades, Mom said that I'd better think about what the world expects if I wanted to be a success. Appearance opens doors, she said. Integrity keeps them open.

My mom is a retired teacher, not a businesswoman, so her tips are not about "hot strategies for network marketing" or "how to manipulate your boss." In my opinion, they are timeless keys to business success, no matter what career you pursue.

Of course, I'm lucky. I've had an incredible amount of good fortune in life, much of which I attribute to having Mom's sage advice rattling through my brain. In honor of Mother's Day, I'm sharing her words of career wisdom in the hope that they can improve your fortunes too.

Be respectful. In the context of work, being respectful isn't about calling everyone "Ma'am" or "Sir." It's about a variety of nonverbal cues that tell the people you're working with that they're important.

If you have a meeting, show up on time. To arrive late indicates that you imagine your time is worth more than others'. Also show up neat — hair combed, teeth brushed and appropriately dressed. If you're badly groomed, you draw negative attention to yourself and away from what's being discussed. That's insulting to everyone around you.

Showing up on time and well-groomed, of course, is something that you do every day. It tells your boss that you think your job is important, which is a good way to keep it.

Listen. You may have graduated with straight A's from Harvard, but your boss and co-workers probably have thoughts and ideas that are every bit as valid as yours. Some of them have experience that no amount of education can match.

When a co-worker is speaking, be quiet and pay attention. Don't think about how you can jump into the conversation to impress your boss. Don't construct answers to questions that have only been half-asked. If you're confused by what's being said, ask questions — politely and after the person who is speaking is through. If you're a good listener, your analysis of the situation will end up being better. And that actually will impress your boss. Besides, you might just learn that your co-workers are pretty darned bright, which could come in handy later when you need help or advice.

Be honest. Do a real day's work for a day's pay, regardless of who is (or isn't) watching. Clocking in on time, and then wasting hours in your cubicle playing games online is tantamount to stealing. Stealing would not make Mom proud.

But what if you've completed your work and have two hours left before you can go home? There's probably work to do somewhere in the office. See if you can help someone else.

Nobody's got work? Then your business has a problem. Start thinking about how you can help solve it, or start looking for another job.

Be responsible. If you say you will do something, do it. Do it as best you can and in the time allotted. If you find you need help to complete the job on time — or realize that the job cannot be completed as scheduled — give your boss warning before the due date, so that no one (boss or client) is blindsided.

Apologize. At some point in time, you will mess up. Don't make excuses. If you mess up, apologize. Then fix it.

Don't whine. Your boss, co-workers and clients are not always fair, polite and reasonable. Life's like that. Get over it.

If the problem is consistent and detrimental to your company or career, you need to fix it or flee. Tell your savviest friends what's up and get their advice. (Discussing a problem in an effort to find solutions is not whining, though you can whimper a bit with your closest friends.) If it's necessary to go to the boss,

try to come to him with a solution at the same time you present the problem. Be a problem solver, not a person who spreads discontent.

Be grateful. You can focus on the bad economy and your dead-end job, or you can be grateful for the fact that you have work that pays enough to keep food on the table and a roof over your head. Career coaches say that having a good attitude can land you a job. So even if you don't like your work, smile. Think of what you do like. It makes you more pleasant to be around and may just land you a better opportunity.

Thanks, Mom. Happy Mother's Day.

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