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Memo from your future boss: want to stand out and get ahead? have a great work ethic

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RE- Work Ethic

Great job! You're doing well in school, getting involved in several activities outside of school, and preparing yourself for a successful career in the future. You're off to an excellent start.

But I'm speaking for all of your future employers when I give you this advice: A strong work ethic is key in standing out among other employees. If you establish your reputation as a cooperative, committed employee who genuinely cares about the job and is not afraid of hard work, you will do well in your career.

Read on for tips on boosting your work ethic. You can put these tips to work today, in school, in extracurriculars, and at part-time jobs.

1. Go the extra mile. Every job involves a specific set of duties. Performing those basic tasks will get you paid, but not necessarily noticed. "The best way to impress a supervisor is to do something that shows you will go above and beyond what's expected," says Rick Probststein, CEO of TopJobLeads.com, a New York employment firm. He describes one employee who spent the weekend doing market research for a new project and presented it to his boss Monday morning. His effort allowed the company to complete the project ahead of schedule. "How could the supervisor not be impressed by that?" asks Probststein.

Going the extra mile doesn't always need to be that dramatic. Even the smallest gestures will be appreciated.

If you're a whiz with spreadsheets and a coworker encounters a problem, volunteer to help out. After you finish a project, ask your boss whether he or she needs anything else. Showing a willingness to do more than the minimum demonstrates that you care about your work.

2. Work the clock. Ever feel as if somebody's watching you? When it comes to the time you put in on the job, that's a virtual certainty. Other workers—including your boss—take note of your work hours. At a minimum, that means getting to work on time, not leaving early, and being punctual for meetings and other commitments. But a strong work ethic may require more.

"Avoid watching the clock and packing up exactly at the end of your shift or dosing time," says Louis Lamorte Jr., director of the Career Services Center at La Salle University in Philadelphia. "While it's understandable if you have a prior personal commitment, making a daily habit of being the first one to leave may tarnish your reputation as a hard worker."

That doesn't mean that you routinely have to work much longer hours than required. The key is to show you are not an inflexible clock-watcher, but rather someone who puts in the necessary time to get things done.

The same concept applies to lunch breaks or other time away from the job. For example, if you're allowed an hour for lunch, make sure you generally stay within that time span. If occasionally you need to take longer to run personal errands, just clear it with your boss in advance and be willing to make up the time later.

3. Show interest. Your employer wants to see that you are truly interested in the job. You can show your commitment to your job and career by asking questions, showing enthusiasm, and staying focused.

"Don't appear distracted," advises Monique Sudikoff, a vice president for the Nielsen Company in Westport, Conn. She has watched younger workers in her market research firm fall asleep in meetings or glance at cell phones during training sessions. She even noticed one new employee checking her hair in her computer screen while an experienced coworker was explaining an important concept.

"If you are sleepy or have to get focused, ask for a break and get a cup of coffee," she says.

Staying focused also means saving personal business for after work. Avoid devoting work time to texting, shopping online, or updating your Facebook status. Such time wasters can seriously erode your efforts to prove you're a dedicated worker.

4. Offer respect. One thing you can't overemphasize in the workplace is respect. It's vital to show others that you respect them. That may involve something as simple as speaking politely or as challenging as recognizing the value of opinions that differ from your own.

"Treat your fellow employees with respect and courtesy," says Richard Goldman, author of *Luck by Design: Certain Success in an Uncertain World*. "Treat everyone you encounter outside of your company the same way. When you go to work for any organization, you are representing them--be a proud and caring representative."

You can show respect in any number of ways. Say thank you. Be thoughtful about imposing on the time of fellow employees. Accept suggestions or criticisms with a positive attitude. Find out how people prefer to be addressed (as in "Mr. Wright" versus "Sean"), and honor their wishes.

Another way to demonstrate respect for your job and your colleagues is to dress appropriately for the job.

"I don't want to see your underwear, or your feet, or your belly button," says Sudikoff, who works in a corporate office. "Be sure to adopt the type of dress that's appropriate for your environment. If you're not sure, err on the side of being overdressed at first. You can always pare down later."

5. Be a team player. The value of teamwork is a lifelong lesson. In kindergarten, you might have been graded on how well you played with others. To be truly successful in your career, you need to be able to work well with others. Whether you work in an office, a warehouse, a department store, or anywhere else, showing a strong work ethic means contributing as part of a team.

More than anything else, that means becoming aware of your team's shared goals and then dedicating yourself to helping to meet them. Teamwork involves doing your job well and considering the needs and feelings of coworkers. If a colleague is behind on a project, maybe you can pitch in and help him or her catch up. Or if a supervisor praises your work, you might point out that two of your coworkers also played key roles.

"Being a team player is the best way to demonstrate a good work ethic," says Nell Bradley, a recent college grad who works in public relations for Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. "If you look for ways to create a positive work environment for your team, you will find more opportunities to be deemed a valuable employee."

What would you do?

Consider your reactions to the following scenarios. your teacher will have the quiz results

1. On your first day on the job, you notice that coworkers are dressed more formally than you are. You decide to

- a) reflect your personality by continuing to dress in the more casual style you prefer.
- b) dress more conservatively starting the next day.
- c) ask your supervisor whether there is a dress code or any unofficial expectations about the preferred style of dress.
- d) seek an opinion from another employee who is not your supervisor.

2. You need to leave work promptly at 5 p.m. to make the tip-off of a big game, but your supervisor asks whether you can stay late to help finish an important project. You decide to

- a) respond that you'll be glad to help out another time, but you have to leave on time today.
- b) say that you'll help, but that you can stay for no more than a half hour.
- c) agree to help and plan on staying as long as necessary, even if you're late for the game.
- d) ask if a coworker can stay in your place.

3. Your friends keep texting you at work, but company policy restricts the use of personal cell phones. You decide to

- a) ignore the policy until someone tells you otherwise.
- b) respond as often as you can, making sure not to text while in the presence of your supervisor.
- c) limit texting to your lunch break.
- d) inform your friends you'll be out of touch during the workday.

4. You're caught up on all your duties, but nearly half the workday is still left. You decide to

- a) ask your supervisor whether there's a project you can help out with.
- b) kill time by surfing the Web.
- c) complain to coworkers that you're bored.
- d) use the time to catch up with some training related to your job.

Key Points

1. A strong work ethic is key in standing out among other employees.
2. A strong work ethic means proving yourself to be a committed employee who genuinely cares about the job and is not afraid of hard work.
3. Examples of a good work ethic include putting in extra effort without being asked, not watching the clock, showing genuine interest in the work, respecting others and oneself, and being a good team player.

Critical Thinking

Can a good work ethic be learned, or is it a natural personality trait? Explain your answer.

Extension Activity

Have students take the quiz "What Would You Do?" on page 10. The answers reflecting the best work ethic are: 1. b or c, 2. c, 3. c or d, 4. a or d. Have students discuss their choices and reactions to the questions.

Resource

* The Work Ethic Site (University of Georgia) www.coe.uga.edu/workethic

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