

Tips Sheet: Dining With the Boss—Do's and Don'ts

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The boss invites you to dine out with her or him. What an opportunity for you to impress and position yourself for success! Yet, what a minefield to maneuver when manners are mandatory. Here are five do's and five don'ts to give you a start on your dining etiquette and keep you poised for professional progress.

Do...

1. Dress appropriately...and a little better.

Learn the dress code expected for the dining venue as well as how your boss plans to dress. At minimum, match your boss' level of formality. If not too pretentious, dress in formal business attire. You are responsible for making a solid impression to your boss, not the other way around.

2. Observe your boss (host) for how to behave when in doubt as to dining etiquette.

Mirror your boss' dining etiquette (if it is good); practice good dining etiquette yourself (if your boss' is poor). Follow your leader when the leader demonstrates proper etiquette.

3. Review good dining etiquette ahead of time.

In this era of readily-available information you can easily find dining etiquette tips on the Internet or at your local library. Ask a life skills teacher at a local high school to give you a crash course in dining etiquette. Use your Internet search engine of choice to locate free information on table settings and proper dining behavior.

4. Practice your conversational skills.

Prepare conversation-starters for the first few minutes of "small talk" typical when settling into a meal. Check with people who know your boss to learn what topics to avoid. Identify what interests your boss outside of work—without getting too personal—and ask questions that engage her or him in talking about what they enjoy.

5. Make sure you are comfortable with the invitation, and understand who pays the bill.

If you feel uncomfortable about your boss' reason for the invitation, ask. A good reason to ask is so that you can prepare appropriately for the event. While a perfectly reasonable expectation is that if the boss invites you to dine out, then they will pay for the meal. Yet, do not assume anything. Make a light-hearted comment—or simply ask—to clarify whether you will share the meal expense so that you will be financially prepared. Politely decline, and suggest an alternative meeting venue, if you continue to feel discomfort at your boss' motive for the invitation.

Don't...

1. Mistake the occasion as purely social .

Dining out may feel social, but your boss has an ulterior motive for inviting you to dine out. It may be to talk with you about your career advancement or to see how you respond to an idea or challenge. It may be to announce a business change or to see how you measure-up for new responsibilities. No matter what the motive, keep your boss / professional relationship in mind and act accordingly.

2. Announce to everyone else in the workplace that you are dining out with your boss.

Strike a delicate balance between bragging and secretiveness. Your invitation may strike a sensitive nerve with jealous colleagues. Suspicion at your boss' intentions may arise. Your boss may not wish for the invitation to be made public. Be honest if asked, yet avoid flaunting the occasion.

3. Order alcohol.

If your boss indicates that you may order a cocktail or an after-dinner aperitif, resist doing so. If you must offer an excuse, say that you would rather not have a drink this time. The real reason is that alcohol—no matter what level of tolerance you think you have—lowers your inhibitions and opens you up for saying or doing something you will later regret. Remain clear-headed when dining with your boss.

4. Order sloppy food.

Avoid food you must eat with your hands or that spills easily or splashes. Remember that you must make the positive impression. Licking your fingers or risking an errant splash onto your boss' clothing (or your own) detracts from the positive impression.

5. Use your cell phone or perform personal grooming at the table.

Give your undivided attention to your boss and the meal. If you must keep your cell phone on for family concerns, put it on vibrate and silence the ringer. If you must answer the phone for an emergency, excuse yourself and leave the table to do so. As far as personal grooming—fixing your hair, picking your teeth (or worse), cleaning your nails at the table—yuck! Need I say more?