



Business Etiquette in UAE

By Ali Alsloom

International postings are an exciting way to travel the world and really experience new cultures. Over 25,000 people from all over the world are joining the predominantly expatriate population of the UAE every month.

With so many nationalities living here, it is no wonder that we have the opportunity to interact with a myriad of different ideas, religious values and behaviours.

These differences can be exciting and interesting, but on the other side, can leave us in a permanent state of bewilderment.

As a UAE National, I think it is my duty to help people better understand the UAE culture and its people. Here are nineteen steps that I have put together that may help you enjoy your stay here.

“Remember the 19 Rules”

1. Your best option when doing business in the UAE for the first time is to observe closely, be patient and make a real effort to understand how local customs affect the modern business environment. Network, network, network – business acumen here can at times be more important than specific industry knowledge.
2. An Islamic greeting (*Al-Salam Alaykom*) is the most appropriate, and men follow this with a quick nose-to-nose touch while shaking hands. Nose rubbing is a common practice only between Gulf Arab men. Don't attempt this with any Arab man if you are meeting him for the first time.
3. Women greet each other by kissing several times on both cheeks. Some Arab men will shake hands with Western women. It is customary to ask about the health of a person and his or her family several times before beginning light conversation. Refreshments usually are served before serious matters are discussed.
4. Saving face and the avoidance of shame are vital to Arabs. You may have to compromise on some issues to protect the dignity of a person even when there appears to be no substantive reason to do so.



5. Once a verbal commitment has been clearly made; it is ethically, if not legally, binding. Confidentiality and discretion are of the utmost importance in all business dealings.

6. Punctuality is not considered as important in the Arab world as perhaps it may be in North America and other countries.

7. Expect other people to walk in and out of your meeting for an important quick chat.

8. Do not be surprised if mobile phones are answered all the way through your meeting. Trust me, even working expatriates who live and work in the UAE may have adopted this new habit, simply because we are all required to answer the phones if it's the boss calling, so don't worry everyone will understand.

9. Sports are a good topic of conversation. Soccer (football), horse racing (with betting prohibited), and falconry are the most popular traditional sports.

10. Hosting visitors is considered a virtue among Arabs, so they will usually take care of all of the entertaining within their country.

11. Be prepared to remove your shoes before you enter a house. Even if your Arab host has a marble floored

"Majlis" (large living room), it's still important to ask first if you should or shouldn't take your shoes off.

12. Guests are treated to coffee and the scent of incense as soon as they arrive. Coffee is served in small cups and it is common to take more than two cups. One shakes the empty cup to indicate one does not desire more. Otherwise, the server is free to refill an empty cup. Tea and soft drinks soon follow the coffee.

13. Although many families, especially more westernized ones, have tables and chairs, families eating without guests usually prefer to sit in a circle on the floor.

14. When sitting on the floor, try to not to show the bottom of your feet to an Arab; this is considered offensive.

15. After fualah (a dessert meal after the main course) or after a meal, hosts serve coffee and guests may leave after drinking the coffee or tea.

16. Arabs speak at a much closer distance than most Europeans and North Americans are accustomed to. Do not distance yourself. There is also more physical contact.

17. The left hand is considered unclean in the Muslim and Arab world. Always use the right hand in preference to the left (unless you

are handling something considered unclean). It is best to not eat with the left hand; eat only with your right hand.

18. Although Arabs constantly gesture with their hands while speaking, they do not point directly at another person as this would be considered impolite.

19. Modesty and respect are highly valued in Arab cultures, which is why most women and men will wear modest clothing. You will not be expected to also wear traditional clothes, however, modest dress will gain you much respect.

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