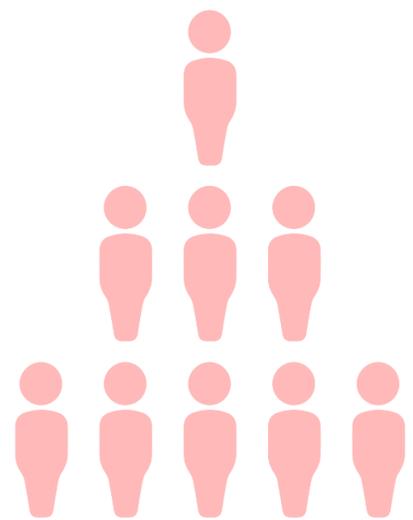


THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO KOREAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

By Richard Walker

Learn these simple rules to
avoid 80% of all mistakes
westerners make when doing
business with Koreans.



Hint: the rules are influenced by Confucist Ideals and
Military Hierarchy.



DRESS CODE



You will be judged by your **appearance** and **grooming**. (clean shaven and clean cut are a plus)



Dress shoes, slacks, a button up shirt and **tie** are recommended.



If you are meeting an **ajosshi**, or married man over 40, it's a good idea to wear a **jacket** and tie.



Your **watch** will also be judged. Citizen and Tissot are considered minimum. Brands at the Tag Heuer level grant instant credibility. Anything cheaper than 200 USD is better left at home.



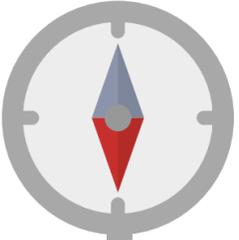
Bring a wallet and a business card holder (full of your business cards), preferably a brand name like Mont Blanc or Gucci.

Did you know?

In a survey of 341 HR managers in Korea, 75.7% answered that the appearance of interviewees affects their hiring decisions.

In Korea, one's appearance and grooming are as important as their qualifications.

DURING THE MEETING



GREETINGS

Bow slightly and **shake with two hands using a loose grip** (a firm grip is a sign of aggression) after the oldest/highest ranking person reaches out.

Business cards are exchanged at the same time while standing, even if you have their contact info.

Don't make small talk at this stage, just follow our formula unless a question is asked.

Present your business card with two hands when the oldest/highest ranking person presents theirs.

Make sure your info is facing the person accepting the card, so they can read it.

Look at their card for **3 seconds**, then say their name and title (add a "*nim*", which roughly translates to "sir", at the end of the title for extra points).

Place their card on the table so you can see it during the meeting (don't put it in your pocket as this is uncommon).



EYE CONTACT

The older person by more than two years usually makes eye contact while the younger person will look away slightly as a **sign of respect**.

As a non-Korean, you can simply use **soft eye contact**.



MEETING AGENDA

The **main topics** in order of importance are:

1. **Price negotiation** (they will want a discount)
2. **Quality Assurance** (especially for ongoing projects)
3. **Their Company History and Process** (during the first meeting)

You will hear a full presentation on their company history and milestones. Prepare yours as well.

Koreans are **vague** by Western standards, especially during the first meeting. They will not settle on numbers, dates and specifics.

They will minimize the time spent on details and will mostly be **feeling out the situation**.

BEFORE YOU MEET



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

AGE

Your age and job title relative to others determines how you communicate and behave.

A higher age/job title will give you more credibility.

GENDER

Although becoming less important, gender is a factor. Married males over 40, or “ajosshis”, are perceived as having a higher position in society.

TITLE

In business you will either be a 갑 (gahb), “the party with power and money” or 을 (eul), “the party without”. Some examples of this are “employer and employee” or “buyer and seller” relationships.

Two people usually attend a business meeting, a junior employee and a senior employee, so plan accordingly.



GATHERING INFORMATION

Don't expect them to present the information you need.

Prepare **specific questions**.

When they respond that "they aren't sure" or "don't know yet", ask politely **when** you can receive the information.

Koreans will answer your questions after providing context. Whereas in English, questions are answered first, then an explanation is provided.

If someone goes off on a tangent when asked a question, **ask again for a rough estimate**.



PRICE NEGOTIATION

It's ok to ask for a **discount** or an **adjustment**.

Asking for a final and best offer is considered a bit aggressive.

Koreans won't say "no", instead they will say "**it will be a little difficult**".

Expect there to be **multiple rounds** of negotiations.

It takes **at least a week** to finalize details.

The decision maker usually doesn't attend the meeting, and their approval is necessary to proceed.



GIFTS

You will most likely receive a gift near the end of the meeting.

Accept the gift with **two hands** and thank them.

Do not open it in their presence.



WHAT TO BUY AS A GIFT

You are not required to give a gift unless you are a seller, but **something small** would be appreciated.

Company gifts (pens, umbrellas, calendars, etc.) are safe choices.

For women: Yankee Candle or L'Occitane Hand Cream.

For men: alcohol (Ballentines or Chivas Regal if you really want to make an impression) or golf equipment, especially golf balls as they cost double in Korea.

AFTER THE MEETING



GOODBYES

Goodbyes are short.

Repeat the same steps in the **Greetings** section minus the business card exchange.

Thank them for their time.

If your deal is important to them, you will probably be invited to a meal. Expect alcohol to be involved.



HAVING LUNCH/DINNER

Most Korean restaurants serve a few main dishes with a variety of side dishes that you can get refilled. The **main dishes** sometimes come in a large pot for everyone **to share**.

Due to this, people in groups tend to order the same thing.

Feel free to order what you want at a western restaurant.

The **youngest** staff member in each group will set up the **utensils** and pour the **water**. You can gauge how progressive the company is if the oldest/highest ranking person helps out.

When the **oldest/highest** ranking person lifts their utensils, you can **begin eating**.

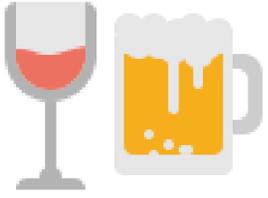


TIPS AT A KOREAN RESTAURANT

- **Do not lift** plates or bowls while eating.
- **Do not use** chopsticks and a spoon at the same time.
- **Close your mouth** when chewing and try not to make noise.
- When you're done eating, put your spoon and chopsticks in their **original position**.
- Koreans normally share side dishes, so **don't repeatedly touch** them with your chopsticks.
- Small talk during meals is uncommon, especially with middle-aged people.
- People from Seoul tend to **eat quickly** by western standards.
- The **oldest person** or the **person inviting** usually **pays** for the meal. You might find yourself fighting for the check.
- If you are the **seller**, regardless of age, make sure to fight extra hard for the check.

Pro Tip

If you absolutely need to pay, pretend to go to the bathroom near the end of the meal and pay at the front (this would only be acceptable if you are a seller).



AFTER DINNER

Jeopdae Culture (wining and dining) can determine if a deal gets made. A night out with Koreans will involve **bar hopping** and possibly **Noraebang** (Karaoke).

You can be **more informal** (semi-formal would be the operative word with **basic etiquette still upheld**) and get to know each other better. Don't say no to the first shot of alcohol and make sure you **finish it in one gulp**.

When an older/higher ranking person pours liquor for you, hold your shot glass in your right hand and touch the bottom of your right elbow or the bottom of the glass with your left hand. This same principle applies when you pour for others.

If you are reaching your limit, do the "cheers (geonbae)" motion and **lightly touch the glass** to your lips and put it back on the table.

If you don't drink at all, make sure you fill your shot glass with soft drinks and go through the motions.

The most important seat is the center furthest from the entrance. The second most important is near the most important seat, so the two can converse. The least important seat is near the entrance.

If you see that an older/higher ranking person's glass is empty, pick up the bottle with your right hand as to cover the label. Touch the bottom of your right elbow or the bottom of the bottle with your left hand. Pour liquor (usually soju) until it fills 3/4 of the glass.

When you drink, **turn your head slightly away** from the older/higher ranking person and drink.

Koreans have a variety of drinking games, some involving math. I advise you not to play them as you will lose.



FOLLOW UP

Make sure to **follow up in two days**.

Request the information you didn't receive during the meeting.

If you do not receive it by the date promised, **call them** on the phone. Expect to follow up for a week or two.



"I learned these rules the hard way while working as the token white guy at Korean companies for 10 years.

After starting a translation company, I follow these guidelines whenever I interact with Korean clients.

As with all cross-cultural interaction, keep an open mind.

We hope these tips help you get the results you need."

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