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Manners Make the Man

Manners in Japan used to be the core of communication. Measured in body language, good manners revealed character. A person's posture (*shisei*) was considered synonymous with his or her attitude and upbringing.

Today a more casual attitude prevails, and this has led to a deterioration of manners once taken for granted. Lack of consideration for others results in *get out of my way* behavior. In small ways it shows when young people sit in the Silver Seat while old people stand. In larger ways it manifests in the increase in corporate and political scandals, and in the rising rate of violent crime.

Koshikawa Reiko is the founder of the NPO *Edo Shigusa* (www.edoshigusa.org), and the author of many books, including a Manga version, *Edo Shigusa Nyūmon (Manga-ban)*, published in 2007 by Sangokan. Her books and lectures contend that Edo manners are a fundamental but endangered aspect of Japanese social behavior, and show many examples contrasting traditional manners with modern behavior.

Edo Shigusa goes far beyond etiquette. It shows how to live with respect, culture, and style. In *Edo Shigusa*, we find many words worth keeping.

Act now, think on your feet (*Soku Jikkō*)

Japanese have a traditional distaste for talk in the form of excuse making. People were told that in problem solving it was more important to be *hands on* than to *talk on*. This is basis of *kaizen*, or continuous improvement, in which you think as you work, and make improvements as you go.

Sixth sense (*Kan*)

Much effort was made to refine the senses and develop the ability to intuit what was going on, rather than waiting to be told. This led to exceptional development in many aspects of culture and craftsmanship.

Answer with one yes ("Hai!" *wa ichido kiri*)

It was considered important to answer immediately, and with a single yes, to show that you were fully attentive and ready to act. To say yes twice was considered flippant and rude, as in "Yeah, yeah. What do you want?"

Pretend not to notice (*Toki ni wa, mite minai furi*)

If it spared a person's dignity or gave them a chance to avoid embarrassment, it was sometimes considered best to pretend you didn't notice. Helping a person save face led to loyalty and trust.

View the positive side of things (*Yō ni toraete*)

In Edo culture complainers were thought to be energy drainers. It was not only more pleasant to be around people who were positive, it was more energizing and productive too.

Don't cross your arms or legs (*Udekumi Ashikumi shigusa*)

Crossed arms were considered to be a sign of stubbornness or a closed mind, while crossed legs showed a lack of respect. In both cases, crossing your limbs also made you less ready for action, and more vulnerable to injury or attack. In less casual times, bad posture showed bad attitude.

Move over one fist width (*Kobushi koshi ukase*)

Even if a bench seat is crowded, you can make room for one more by moving just the width of one fist. Even in a crowded space, it was considered right to make room for others.

Don't cut across in front of people (*Yokogiri shigusa*)

In pedestrian traffic it was considered rude to cut across in front of someone. Even today, many Japanese signal with their hand before crossing in front of you.

Be polite in momentary encounters (*Sokunoma tsukiai*)

Edo was crowded and busy. Daily life included many brief encounters with people characterized by greetings, which were the lubrication of communication. In brief encounters, a smile, a polite word, a gesture of kindness can go a long way.

Edo Shigusa is about consideration for others, having a positive attitude, and showing respect in body language and behavior. Many of the lessons from *Edo Shigusa* make good sense to us today. We learn this behavior by watching others. But as Fred Astaire said, *the hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any.*

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