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The Grace of Unknown Callers: A Reflection on Smartphone Etiquette



April M. Bagon-Faeldan, PhD
Associate Professor III
Mindoro State University, Oriental Mindoro

"You only have a few seconds to make a good first impression, and it's almost impossible ever to change it." – Tony Hsieh

The Bird's Eye View

In an age where every day you may experience being dominated by spam calls and digital scams, there is anxiety with which many people answer unknown numbers has become almost a cultural norm. Rudeness became a defense mechanism against telemarketers and fraudsters. However, there is a question about whether it is normal to take and answer unwanted calls in a rude manner. My experience as an educator has taught me otherwise, revealing that courtesy and caution need not be mutually exclusive.

Outside the Classroom

I have been a college and graduate professor for more than nineteen years. In my work, I have learned that being a teacher extends beyond the classroom walls. You sometimes have to work at home. For this reason, I make it a habit to collect the smartphone numbers of my students at the start of each semester. This practice allows me to reach out when a concern about grades or missing work arises.

The Encounter and the Unexpected Response

I do not accept late output. Although there was a time when I almost needed to submit my grades, and there was one missing on my class record. This one particular smartphone call has stayed with me as a gentle lesson in human interaction. I had noticed that one of my students, whom I will call Dinah, had not submitted her showcase portfolio. Rather than wait for her another day, I decided to call her directly. I dialed her number and waited.

When Dina answered, her voice came loud and sharp. "Hello, sino ito?!!! [Hello, Who is this?]" she demanded. I carried an edge of suspicion and a minor annoyance. I could sense she assumed she was dealing with an unwelcome intrusion, which, I supposed, she experienced day by day.

I stayed calm. I smiled to myself, amused by the situation. "Hello, si Vidia ito," I replied gently, using my first name. There was a pause on the other end. "Vidia!?" she repeated, clearly revealing she is confused. "Sinong Vidia?!!!" [Who is Vidia?]

I was still smiling as I answered, "Si Vidia Nala." The moment of recognition came swiftly. I could hear the drastic shift in her voice, the sudden realization. Recognizing me as her professor was on the line. Her professor had listened to her sharp greeting. Maybe a moment of embarrassment on her part.



"Mam Vidia!!!" she exclaimed, her loud voice now filled with laughter and embarrassment. "Kayo po pala!!!! Sorry po, Mam!" [It is you! I am so sorry Mam!] The formality and respect that had been absent just seconds before came flooding back. She apologized, and we both laughed at the awkward moment before moving on to discuss her missing showcase portfolio.

The Same Story

This has a similar story. An HR personnel from Company W sent an SMS to a job applicant named Lina regarding the details of an upcoming scheduled interview. The message simply read: "Hello Lina" – with no identification of who was sending the message, which company they represented, or the purpose of the contact. Lina, unaware of who was messaging her, responded rudely and defensively: "Sino kang tanga ka?" (Who are you, stupid?)

The HR representative then followed up on the interview details, revealing their identity and purpose only after Lina's hostile reply.

Points to Ponder

Many of us assume that an unfamiliar message or call justifies an unfamiliar or rude tone. This small moment illuminates a cultural contradiction. We are defensive because we are uncertain. Yet on the story of Lina and Dinah's initial rudeness—the loud, demanding "Who is this?" and "Sino kang tanga ka?"—did not protect them. It did not filter out unwanted communication. It did not serve their interests more than a simple, civil "Hello, who is calling?" or "Sino po sila?!" would have. It reveals a simple thing that is missing: the communication etiquette.

On the other hand, I do understand the impulse and immediate reaction. Our smartphones ring with robocalls and scammers more often than we would like. It is annoying and tiring to answer call after call only to hear a recorded voice or a stranger trying to sell us something we do not need. The instinct to protect ourselves is natural. There is no argument about it. But protection does not require rudeness. We can be cautious and still be kind. There is a saying: "It is the best choice to be kind no matter what."

Dinah and Lina taught me a lesson. Their embarrassment was absolute, but so was her quick return to grace. She reminded me that beneath our defensive habits, most of us want to be kind. We want to be seen as respectful people. We sometimes forget that every call is an opportunity to practice that respect.

So, the next time your smartphone rings with an unfamiliar number, I request that you pause before answering. Take a breath. Remember that the voice on the other end might be a scammer, but it might also be someone who needs... cares about you, or someone you do not yet know but might one day be grateful you met. Answer calmly. Answer with patience. And if the call turns out to be unwanted, hang up and block the number. You will have lost nothing but gained the quiet satisfaction of having been, for a moment, the person you hope to be.

In the end, smartphone etiquette is not about smartphones. It is about how we treat the unknown, how we greet the stranger, and how we hold onto our humanity in a world that sometimes makes it easy to let go. A smartphone call is just a smartphone call. But the way we answer it is a small mirror of who we are.