

Manners Police for Public Transit Users?

In Japan the ultimate weapon against poor manners is public embarrassment.

Citizens of Yokohama take public transit every day, and many of them are upset by what they see as a decline in courtesy. "Many people forget their manners on the train," said Mrs. Ono, a daily user of public transit. "They put their bags on the seat next to them, they listen to loud music and they do not offer their seats to older people." A recent survey in Japan showed that more than 75 percent of people who take public transportation believe that manners are at a "critically low level" on the city's trains and buses.

The Japanese have a worldwide reputation for excellent manners, so this situation was disturbing to many people. The city of Yokohama has decided to combat the growing discourtesy by hiring "manners police." The six men and six women employed will approach people who display bad manners and correct their behaviour by politely explaining to the offenders how they are being rude. The etiquette cops will be dressed in bright green uniforms that are easy to identify. A city official said that their salary will be approximately \$15 a day. "We are hiring retired older people to do the job because they will get more respect from younger generations. Also, they have a better idea of good manners. They enjoy passing their knowledge on to the next generation."

Before they can start the job, however, the manners police will undergo training in manners. "It can be very hard for everyone to agree on the correct manners for every situation," explained the city official. "For example, it is rude to hold open the door of a subway car since it stops the train and delays everyone's travel time. However, it would be polite to hold open the door for an elderly person or a pregnant woman who is trying to enter the subway car before the door closes; these individuals cannot walk as quickly as others, and holding the door open for them is a considerate courtesy. Etiquette rules vary according to different circumstances."

The manners police will rely on a sense of public shame and embarrassment to communicate their message; they will not have the power to impose fines. Security guards will accompany the manners police to ensure that they are not harassed. "No Japanese wants to be disciplined publicly," the city official said. "It is humiliating. We believe that after a few weeks of seeing the manners police at work, people will correct their behaviour because they do not want to risk being humiliated in front of strangers."