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The Tech Bros Are Going to Etiquette School

Founders who built their names on coding and hard-charging leadership are learning that in the AI era, soft skills matter more than ever

By **Jamie Waters** [Follow](#) | Photography by Evan Angelastro for WSJ. Magazine

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At Maxwell Social, a private members' club in lower Manhattan that resembles an oligarch's library, the tech bros were doing “caviar bumps”—dollops of roe slurped from the skin between thumb and index finger—chased with shots of cold Belvedere vodka.

Shortly before that Dionysian moment, the group was fanning their faces with strips of paper scented with mandarin, lavender and cedarwood, like dauphins at Versailles, and greeting their seatmates with a firm handshake and a quip about their favorite LLM.



These exercises were part of a four-hour “etiquette class” aimed at tech founders, hosted by VC firm Slow Ventures one Tuesday afternoon in March. About 50 aspiring Zuckerbergs gathered to network and learn the finer points of hosting, fundraising, wine pairings—and, more broadly, how to read the room. Though the event was staged with a knowing wink, its underlying premise was no joke: In the AI era, soft skills matter.

About 50 people attended the 'etiquette class' at Maxwell Social.

Before they were squabbling in court and attending fashion galas, today's masters of the universe

built their names on engineering, coding and hard-charging leadership. But AI has reprioritized the value of certain skills. It can perform complex tech tasks in a fraction of the time it takes even the sharpest MIT grad, and it's only getting better. If tech founders want to stand out in an increasingly saturated and flattened market, they must bolster brilliant ideas by leaning on the one quality AI can't emulate: humanity. Or, as Slow Ventures put it in one of its class invitations—they must lead “with charisma and grace.”

Sam Lessin, a dry-humored founding partner at Slow Ventures and a former vice president of product at Facebook, noted that AI has made coding “super commoditized.” In the vast majority of cases, he said, instilling trust in customers is now more important than being able to show off technical genius. He added that, in the AI era, if you're entering a meeting saying “Hey, I need access to your critical data,” you need to win people over with a respectful demeanor and a low heart-rate.

Such considerations mark the next step in the tech bro's long-simmering glow-up. Twenty years ago, founders proudly eschewed fashion and decorum, too busy writing code and devising a new world order to bother with pleasantries, like basic manners and French cuffs. But in the past few years, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and Co. have acquired designer jackets, trendy jewelry and Popeye biceps. They've become fixtures at cultural events including fashion week and the Met Gala—Bezos was an honorary chair of this year's edition—and appeared on talk shows. They're practically statesmen compared with the dorks of yore.



Kevin Colleran and Yoni Rechtman of Slow Ventures.

Founded in 2011, Slow Ventures hosted its first etiquette class in San Francisco in November 2025. At the New York event, its second, the crowd skewed male, and the firm is planning a fall session aimed at female founders. Last November, it released a “modern etiquette handbook” that sold 700 copies in its first month.

Though both sessions so far were free to attend, they were oversubscribed, only accepting about 30%-50% of applicants. Most attendees were aspiring founders or founders, some of whose startups are backed by Slow. “We saw a market need and decided to run with it,” said Jack Raines, a Slow Ventures associate and the class’s chief raconteur.

At Maxwell Social, it quickly became clear that there was work to be done. Though most men arrived in dark suits befitting the “business formal” dress code, a handful appeared to have wandered in from golf. Then came the wine-pairings panel (a hot topic, according to Raines). When someone asked

about “pét nat” wines—short for *pétillant naturel*, a trendy sparkling variety—one young techie pulled faces that would trigger expulsion from a Swiss lyceum. And when panelist Geoffrey Chen, a British luxury investor, dismissed rosé as often-inferior, my neighbor hid his freshly ordered glass of pink wine.



Slow Ventures has released a comic-book-style etiquette handbook.

“I don’t think it’s about the wine pairings” and knowing how much cologne to spray, said Anirudh Pai, 27, a founder turned investor who attended the class. Rather, he said, it involves bigger questions: “How can you relate to people and understand what people across the world enjoy?” “AI is world historical and it’s going to be used everywhere,” he said, but “you can’t expect founders to enter new markets if they don’t understand culture.”

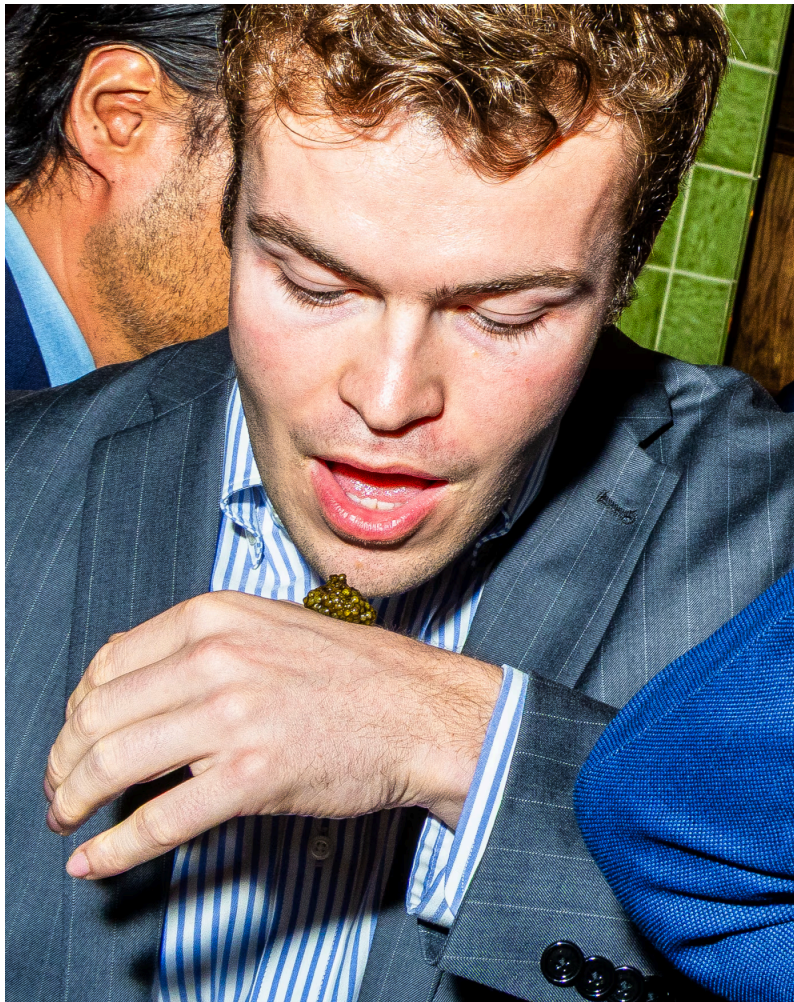
Across the tech sector, some entrepreneurs are feeling the pressure to cultivate not just business acumen but likability. Roland Gavrilescu, 29, the founder of Introspection, an AI systems startup in San Francisco, said it would be “cringe” to discuss etiquette with developers—hardcore tech types who remain focused on product—but added that soft skills are nevertheless expected for anyone looking to win over corporations outside San Francisco. In general, he said tech leaders must increasingly come across as “almost, like, great to hang out with.”

“Your ability to interact with other people and have high EQ will matter increasingly,” said Keith Camhi, managing director of the Techstars Healthcare Accelerator in Washington, D.C. But he stressed that the significance of soft skills depends on the tech sector and your “go-to-

market” strategy: If you’re selling to other businesses and “your sales motion requires human interaction, you better be good at human interaction,” said Camhi. “If your sale is fully executed in an e-commerce shopping cart, it might not be as important.”

“Your bad personality gets better hidden,” he added.

Jackson Denka, 23, the founder of blockchain-based trading platform Azura, views the trend simply as a sign of the industry maturing: “We can’t be weird forever.”



Caviar bumps were followed by shots of vodka.

Tech leaders have famously grappled with a sort of arrested development—acquiring power and fortunes at a young age at the cost of typical life milestones. But Lessin said that the new crop of Silicon Valley founders have even less life experience than previous generations. Not only are they

younger due to the AI boom, but, as Raines noted, many spent their high-school or college years cooped up at home during the pandemic.

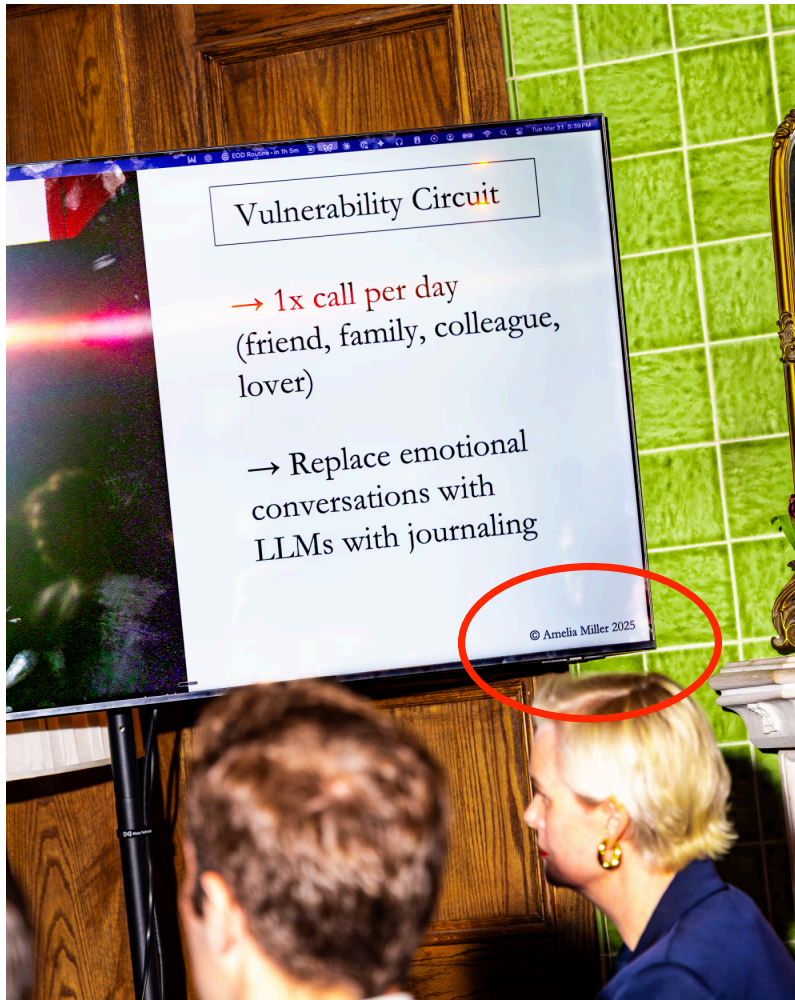
Iris Sun, principal investor of the global flagship fund at 500 Global in Palo Alto, tries to observe and nurture founders' soft skills by spending more time hanging out than she did in previous years. She recently invited one 21-year-old founder she was about to invest in on a 4 a.m. hike to see "whether he properly showed up." (He did, and for that he deserves to become a trillionaire.) Most Friday nights, she said, VCs host poker and pickleball games in Silicon Valley. "It's a good time for us to get to know you better as a real person," she said.



Not everyone is thrilled at the thought of spritzing French cologne onto this famously unvarnished industry. "You don't need finishing school," wrote Garry Tan, the president and CEO of renowned startup accelerator Y Combinator, in a post on X responding to news of Slow's class. "We're just

here to make stuff. We're not here to impress anyone by how fancy our s—is," he wrote.

Denka, the 23-year-old founder, who recently moved from San Francisco to New York, is unconvinced that mimicking billionaires' glow-ups will move the needle for early-stage founders and their businesses. He called the focus on taste and etiquette a bit of "frothiness."



Back in the members' club, surrounded by budding Renaissance men clinking Champagne flutes, Peter Mignacca announced that he was here for practical tips. The 28-year-old, who's helping build a software-led manufacturing company, picked up three pointers that afternoon: he should host more one-on-one client dinners; it's perfectly acceptable to give the sommelier a price range; and three sprays of cologne, one on each wrist and "a brush" against the neck, is ideal, he said—demonstrating with invisible squirts.

Jamie Waters is executive fashion editor at The Wall Street Journal's Off Duty lifestyle section. He oversees the section's style & fashion pages and edits menswear coverage. He also writes Shophound, a shopping column about hunting for great-value items. ...



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