

Rude and discourteous behavior at work can have far more detrimental effects on an organization than many managers anticipate. Performance and profits are adversely affected, but astute managers can assess and control workplace incivility.

Assessing and Attacking Workplace Incivility

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Civility matters. Observing basic rules of interpersonal demeanor and acting with social intelligence enable us to live and work together, whether colleagues or strangers. Yet, some contend that we have hit an age of “whatever,” where rudeness and insensitivity toward others have proliferated to new heights of thoughtlessness. We cut each other off for parking spots, slam the receiver on wrong numbers, and grab grocery bags without so much as an acknowledging glance in the cashier’s direction. Incivilities do not only permeate our social lives; they also taint the office and the factory. At work, people treat each other rudely by using demeaning language or gestures, “flaming” network colleagues, slinging innuendoes, or merely perching impatiently over the desk of someone engaged in a telephone conversation.

In a recent national poll, 90% of respondents believed that incivility is a serious problem and that it contributes to violence and erodes moral values. In another national

poll, three out of four respondents believed that incivility is getting worse. As validated by additional surveys, many employees are victims of rudeness at the office and in the factory. More than half of the 327 front-line workers surveyed in another poll indicated that they had experienced acts of mistreatment at work during the preceding three years. Another study revealed that one-third of more than 600 nurses surveyed had experienced verbal abuse during their previous five days of work. Many employees have experienced interruptions of the workday’s rhythm by incivility instigated by their colleagues.

Incivility is not just a personal issue. It disrupts work patterns and diminishes the effectiveness of its targets and others. And incivility can be the starting point for social interaction that leads to more intent, more overt acts of workplace aggression. The direct organizational costs associated with this phenomenon can be measured against the bottom line. Today’s strong job market and the diminishing loyalties of workers can in-

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crease the fallout costs of incivility, when targets or others who are offended by the encounter pursue abundant opportunities to move on to a more civil setting rather than tolerate the abuse. The effects of incivility can spread more broadly and more quickly today than in the past, as technologies facilitate rapid and asynchronous communication. Instigators of incivility can obnoxiously abuse their targets at (electronic) arm's length, for example, and then blame any foul on the terse nature of electronic messages.

Although many organizational leaders concern themselves about workplace violence, and some even personally fear the return of a workplace "avenger"; far fewer give passing thought to events of lesser immediate severity. An arsenal of books has been created to brace leaders against the extraordinary occurrence of workplace homicide, but scant attention has been paid to day-to-day workplace incivilities. Make no mistake: research reveals that incivility occurs much more frequently, and the associated organizational costs are real.

In this article, we attempt to provide insight for understanding, recognizing and managing workplace incivility. We base this work on lessons gleaned from five years of research on the topic. As resources for this study, we have conducted interviews and workshops across the United States with more than 700 workers, managers and professionals in a wide range of profit, nonprofit and government sectors, from data entry clerks to emergency physicians, plant managers, security experts, human resource professionals, attorneys, chief financial officers, salespersons, law enforcement officers, shift supervisors, senior executives, and many other job categories. Our views have been shaped by questionnaire responses from an additional 775 employees from widely diverse organizations spanning the United States, who hold a full range of hierarchical positions from every standard industrial classification. Our data reflect a balanced sample by gender: sensitivity to rude and disrespectful behavior exists for men and women alike.

Based on theories about social interaction and self-presentation, as well as the experiences and insights that respondents to our studies have shared with us, we will examine the phenomenon of workplace incivility and discuss what organizations and their leaders can do to minimize the occurrence or recurrence of uncivil episodes.

EXAMINING THE PHENOMENON

To capture the essence of workplace incivility and describe its effects, we focus on five main issues: (1) defining workplace incivility, (2) profiling the instigator and the target of workplace incivility, (3) determining why incivility seems to be increasing in the workplace, and (4) uncovering the implications of incivility for employees and organizations, including (5) the effects of nonescalating, spiraling and cascading exchanges.

What is Workplace Incivility?

Although the dictionary definition of civility is “courtesy and politeness toward fellow human beings,” common usage transcends this definition. Civility has less to do with formal rules of etiquette than with demonstrating sensibility of concern and regard, treating others with respect. Workplace civility is behavior that helps to preserve the norms for mutual respect at work; it comprises behaviors that are fundamental to positively connecting with another, building relationships and empathizing. Incivility, in contrast, implies rudeness and disregard toward others. Incivility is mistreatment that may lead to disconnection, breach of relationships and erosion of empathy. Within the work context, incivility entails the violation of workplace norms for mutual respect, such that cooperation and motivation may be hindered broadly.

Workplace norms are the norms of the community of which one is a part while at work. These norms consist of basic moral standards (e.g., do unto others as you would have them do unto you), as well as others



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that develop out of the tradition and culture of the particular workplace (e.g., as formal and informal organizational policies, rules, and procedures are enacted). Although particular norms differ across organizations, industries, and cultures, in every workplace there exist norms of respect for fellow co-workers, that is, a shared moral understanding among the members of the organization that allows organizational members to cooperate. Incivility is a violation of these norms.

None of the incidents of incivility that were subject to our study involved furious physical aggression or violence. Rather, they were mild in intensity. Some targets' experiences of incivility included receiving a nasty or demeaning note, being treated like a child, being berated for action in which one played no part, being excluded from a meeting, and having one's credibility undermined in front of others. Additional examples of instigators' uncivil behaviors included neglecting to greet one another, cutting people off while speaking, and missing the toss to the wastebasket—then leaving the trash for someone else to pick up. To provide further resonance, we offer typical examples of uncivil incidents in the following scenarios as described by participants in our research.

As is apparent in these examples, evaluating an incident to determine whether it is an incivility involves examining the actions and perceptions of the instigator, the target, any observers of the incident, and the social setting in which the incident took place. Thus, workplace incivility can be viewed as a social interaction that unfolds among two or more parties at work, an interaction that can be interpreted differently by different parties.

A distinguishing feature of incivility is its ambiguity. The intent to harm another, as perceived through the eyes of the instigator, the target or observers, is ambiguous. Unlike acts of aggression (such as vandalism, threats, or sabotage) or acts of violence (such as physical assault or homicide), in which the intent to harm is obvious, the intent to harm or injure is not obvious to all relevant parties when acts of incivility are committed. The characteristic ambiguity of intent to harm

TABLE A WORKPLACE INCIVILITY: IN THE TARGETS' OWN WORDS

From a female target: During a presentation that I was making to all of the company's international country managers and vice presidents, the division president stood up and shouted, "No one is interested in this stuff." His comment made me so nervous and upset that I could barely go on. I had been with this company for many years; you'd think he could have offered me a little respect for that alone.

From a female target: During a meeting with staff, my boss overrode my decision and would not allow me to speak about my concerns. He cut me off in the meeting. I thought that was very rude. It made me incredibly angry, nervous, disappointed in his behavior. He asked me to write up the information that I felt he had disregarded so that we could discuss it. It was never discussed.

From a male target: I was pulling off a payroll cycle for a month during December, and I entered "12" (the calendar month) when I should have entered "6" (the fiscal month). The cycle was garbage accordingly. The accountant called me insulting names with my new boss sitting right there next to me. It was humiliating and unfair. It was my first payroll with the company. I was new—it was an honest mistake.

From a male target: I work in a family business and have for some years. My younger brother began working and day one started going to lunch with my father, who had never invited me to lunch.

From a female target: I was talking with a peer when someone in a position higher than mine interrupted our conversation without any consideration to our discussion.

From a male target: I stayed late at work to help my co-worker deal with a pressing problem. Eventually we resolved the problem, and he never even thanked me for my time or for my efforts. I could have been home having dinner with my family instead.

From a female target: My boss asked me to prepare an analysis. This was my first project, and I was not given any instructions or examples. I gave him my first attempt. He told me the assignment was "crap".

From a male target: During a review meeting, I was chastised by my boss in front of a group of people (including peers and subordinates) and told I was stupid and incompetent.

From a female target: In a common work area, a couple of the people I work with leave their trash on the counter and floor and leave their own special paper in the copy machine with no concern for how it affects the rest of us when we need to use the space and equipment. I get tired of cleaning up after them.

differentiates incivility from other mistreatment in organizations, such as harassment and petty tyranny. Although all of these phenomena comprise behaviors that convey a lack of consideration toward others, the ambiguity of intent is a distinguishing feature of incivility.

One may behave uncivilly as a reflection of intent to harm the target, or one may behave uncivilly without intent (e.g., ignorance or oversight). A supervisor may make a sarcastic remark about a subordinate's error in front of the subordinate's peer group, or that same supervisor may borrow supplies from the subordinate and fail to return them, thus leaving the subordinate short on resources. The first uncivil event may reflect an intent to harm; the second may reflect oversight. Moreover, the instigator may harm the target, and yet he or she may not even be cognizant of the underlying intent. Given the potential for ambiguity, instigators of incivility can easily attempt to deny or bury intent, if present, by ignoring the effect (e.g., "What did I say to set you off?"), claim-

ing that the target has misinterpreted the behavior (e.g., "I didn't mean to be brusque; I was just trying to get your attention"), or claiming that the target's reaction is hypersensitive (e.g., "What's the matter, can't you take a joke?"). Thus, incivility brings forth another organizational challenge: it can be difficult to label an incident "incivility." To do so, one must often take a closer look at the instigator and target.

A Profile of the Instigator and the Target

Incivility tends to cascade downward. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the instigator of incivility is three times as likely to be of higher status than the target. Throughout our research, we heard many examples of how hierarchical superiority seemed to permit the instigator to interrupt those in inferior positions or to castigate subordinates freely. As summarized by a respondent, the downward cascading of incivility was prevalent: "Who are the worst

offenders? The big shots, the ones who think they're invincible, that they control everything. They think their word is absolute." In many organizations, power corrupts interpersonal norms as status differentials enable the more powerful to debase the less powerful. As a target told us, "It starts at the top. People will go along with a superior's jokes, banter and degradations to ingratiate themselves."

We also found that the instigator is more than twice as likely to be male (70% male vs. 30% female). Taken together, we discovered that men were seven times more likely to instigate incivility on someone of lower status than on someone of higher status: they sought less powerful targets. By contrast, women are equally likely to behave uncivilly toward their superiors as toward their subordinates, but far less likely to be uncivil to their peers. These gender differences may underscore women's reliance on their peers, or they may reflect women's inability or unwillingness to attune their behaviors to the targets' power. Both male and female instigators showed a slight preference for same sex targets.

Even outside the context of the uncivil incident itself, instigators were generally described as people who tended to be rude to their peers, disrespectful of their subordinates, and hard to get along with. They were seen as temperamental and emotionally responsive to problems. Additionally, instigators were frequently characterized as "sore losers." Although few of the instigators had committed workplace violence, one-fourth of them were known to have threatened someone at work. As we were told by another manager, "He is a total jerk and everyone knows it. You just don't counter his opinion or cross him in any way. If you do, he'll find a way to get even and then some."

With this sort of profile, how do instigators manage to retain their jobs? We found that some instigators were characterized, specifically, as excellent workers who, in some cases, possessed unique talents that benefited their organizations. Also, three out of four respondents characterized the insti-

gators they encountered as particularly skilled at "kissing up": they altered their behaviors significantly to suit their superiors. Although instigators treat equals and subordinates poorly, many tend to be cunning in relationships with their superiors. As we were told by one respondent, "When things begin to escalate, the bosses are never present. Nasty people know when to act, they know when they can get away with it. They think they're very clever."

In accord with the previous findings concerning status differentials, targets of incivility tended to be a few years younger than instigators. Although we suspected that organizational newcomers might be particularly prone to incivility (because of the vulnerabilities inherent in newcomer status), we learned that targets were not neophytes. Rather, they averaged about six years tenure in their organizations, only slightly less than that of their offenders. Also, targets, who averaged 35 years of age at the time of the incident (ages represented ranged from 20 to 64 years), were only slightly younger than instigators, who averaged 41 years of age (with ages ranging from 19 to 72 years).

Why Is Rudeness on the Rise?

Across the broad range of study participants, we found that employees believe workplace incivility to be the result of the changing nature of work at the turn of the new millennium. A majority of participants cited the overwhelming number, complexity, and fragmentation of workplace relationships, facilitated by technologies such as voice mail, e-mail, and teleconferencing. One manager, for example, concluded that "emerging technology takes away the human face—it's easy to 'flame' somebody you don't have to look at." Similarly, many participants complained of work and information overload, leading to intensified feelings of time pressure and thus less time for the polite "niceties" of business life. A supervisor posed the question, "How can I take the time to thank each of my subordinates for a job well done when I have five deadlines to meet, four

meetings to attend, and a spouse and two kids at home who need to be fed dinner?"

Others cited "faddish" corporate initiatives such as employee diversity, reengineering, downsizing, budget cuts, pressures for productivity, and the use of part-time and temporary employees as potential causes for the increase in uncivil workplace behaviors. Some blamed a focus on "lean-and-mean" that seems inevitably to turn inward as employees are called upon to do more with less. Shifting power and escalating demands, invoked in the name of "efficiency," were blamed by many as leading to unchecked incivility. Additional participants told us that they believed workplace rudeness and discourtesy were facilitated by weaker connections to the organization as a function of part-time, temporary, or subcontracted status (e.g., "Nobody treats a lowly temp with any respect; you only have to see them for a week or two.").

Another explanation extended by study participants is that, as organizations have flattened and gone casual, there are fewer obvious cues as to what constitutes "proper" business behavior. Despite the atmosphere of open communication and innovation that "casual days" and even "casual workplaces" can foster, an informal corporate climate can inadvertently encourage employees to behave in ways that are disrespectful of co-workers. Paying attention to dress and conversational cues may influence employees to pause and think before they act, as they follow unspoken rules of politeness and professionalism in their relationships with one another. Without the trappings of formality it can be more difficult for some employees to discern acceptable behavior from unacceptable behavior.

Widespread societal shifts were also cited as causes for rising workplace incivility. Some participants believed that the line between appropriate and inappropriate interactions in society in general continues to blur, thanks to the media and entertainment industries, ineffective primary and secondary schooling, and absentee parenting, in their views. They saw changes in norms out-

side the workplace seeping into offices and factories. An executive commented, "There seems to be a rub-off effect, from what goes on in schools and society. It seems like people come to the business world with little or no sense of what is right or wrong."

Initially, we suspected that incivility would flourish in organizational environments that might be characterized as "rude." Rather, we learned that uncivil incidents were equally likely to occur in settings in which people were generally polite to each other, showed understanding for one another, treated each other with respect, and tended to negotiate without getting emotional. Generally, people in these organizations behaved respectfully toward one another; they neither doubted each other's honesty, nor expressed anger openly. Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents indicated that, in their organizations, employees would be reprimanded and encounter career problems if they sexually harassed someone, overtly threatened someone, or physically attacked someone. Thus, it seems that uncivil behaviors were perceived by study participants as "incivilities" because they were conspicuous social interactions, unexpected behaviors that went against the workplace norms for mutual respect.

Small Indecencies → Bad Business

A clear finding from all phases of our research is that when someone is disrespectful, rude or insensitive toward others at work, the target is not the only one to suffer. We have learned through our research that individual, group and organizational costs of incivility can be substantial. The way employees treat one another impacts not only their ability to work together, but also subsequent interactions with other colleagues and bystanders. Whether the toll accrues as increased absenteeism, reduced commitment, decreased productivity, or organizational departure, the stakes of incivility are high.

Some managers may contend that rudeness and disrespect are beneficial in certain jobs and appropriate to certain organiza-

tional settings. Our data say differently: incivility in the workplace has the potential to harm targets, their fellow employees, and their entire organization, as well as their friends and family members.

Words and deeds conveying disrespect can cause psychological harm to the target. When norms for mutual respect in the workplace are not honored, perceptions of unfairness, or feelings of interactional injustice, occur in the target, generating a state of negative affect. Targets of incivility assess the uncivil action, recognize the unfairness, and experience hurt feelings, displaying both cognitive and affective impairment. Furthermore, targets report that the impact of uncivil incidents may linger for a decade or longer after the event has occurred. The subtleties of incivility—the ambiguity of intent and the suspense about what may happen next—can create additional associated cognitive and affective reactions in targets, such as confusion, fear, or even a sense of panic.

Individuals' experiences of incivility can have substantial bottom-line impact for organizations. When employees are on the receiving end of an uncivil encounter, they adjust their work effort accordingly. More than one-half of the targets in our sample reported that they lost work time because they were worrying about the uncivil incident that had occurred, or about potential future interactions with the instigator. More than one-fourth acknowledged that they wasted work time trying to avoid the instigator. They rerouted former paths to avoid hallway encounters, and they withdrew from collaborative efforts in which the instigator took part.

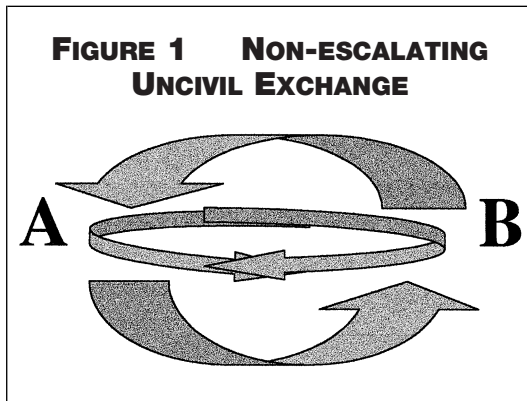
More than one-third of those responding to our questionnaire reported that they intentionally reduced their commitment to the organization as a result of being a target of uncivil behavior. They disengaged from tasks and activities that went beyond their job specifications. Through all phases of our study, people told us that after being targets they ceased voluntary efforts. Some stopped helping newcomers, others stopped offering assistance to colleagues. Additionally, tar-

gets reduced their contributions to the organization as a whole, whether by pulling themselves off of task forces and committees, or by reducing efforts to generate or inspire innovation.

Nearly one-fourth of the people who responded to our survey admitted that they intentionally decreased work efforts in meeting their own responsibilities as a reaction to the uncivil experience. They stopped doing their best. Some also purposefully decreased the amount of time they spent at work. In the absence of civility, with frayed relationships, the workplace had become an unpleasant environment in which they would spend less time. As another means of getting even, approximately five percentage of the respondents admitted that they stole property from the instigator. Five percentage also told us that their experiences as targets of incivility led them to steal property from the organization as retaliation the unfair treatment at work to which they had been subjected.

Perhaps the impact of incivility is reflected most vividly regarding turnover. In nearly one-half of the cases, the uncivil treatment caused the target to contemplate changing jobs. In 12% of the cases, the target actually quit. Given the ambiguity and low intensity of incivility, we find these numbers compelling: even under the best circumstances employee exit is expensive.

What we have learned about target exit is particularly important because the link between incivility and departure is often missed by organizations for two reasons. First, targets who left their workplaces because of an uncivil incident told us that they took their time finding the right fit in a new job (after all, as targets, they had not violated any norms and, therefore, their jobs were in no way jeopardized). Often, they spent months, a year, or more between the uncivil event and departure. As a result of this time lag, it is unlikely that the link between the event and the outcome is perceived by the organization. Second, those who exited told us that they tended to depart quietly; they did not cite incivility as the cause when they left. Some feared additional repercussions by



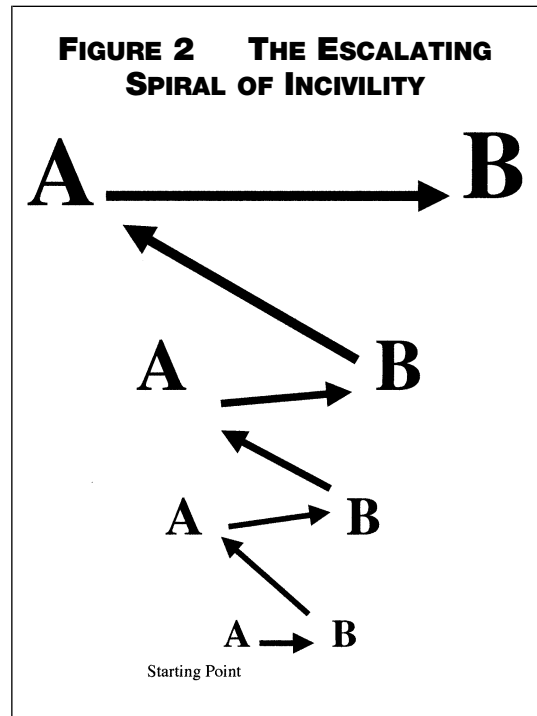
the instigator; others were concerned about appearing to be hypersensitive or trouble making (in their former setting or their new organization); many believed that airing their views would make no difference.

On Nonescalating, Spiraling, and Cascading Exchanges

There are various ways in which incivility may creep through an organization. Uncivil exchanges can continue without escalation, spiral and cascade. When spiraling or cascading occurs, the intensity and the breadth of impact of incivility grows. Participants in all phases of our study noted spiraling and cascading effects of workplace incivility.

In its simplest form, a cycle of incivility can pass in a circular fashion between instigator and target, as shown in Figure 1. When this pattern occurs, the intensity of the interactions themselves does not increase. Rather, rudeness or disregard is simply exchanged in even doses between parties. In the truest sense, this comprises a tit-for-tat exchange at the individual level. The organizational impact of this pattern may increase, nonetheless, if there is a cumulative effect such that participants, witnesses or others are negatively impacted through emotional response or fatigue, or if norms are eroded by the persistence of this pattern.

Sometimes, when an incivility spiral goes unchecked, its effects may escalate, as depicted in Figure 2. A worker who perceives an incivility may retaliate intention-



ally with a counterincivility, leading to a chain reaction that escalates into more aggressive, coercive behaviors. For example, Worker A ignores a request from Worker B, who responds by mocking A, who then utters an obscene insult to B, who retorts by shoving A, who hits B, and so on. These interactions can escalate quite quickly, or either party may furtively await a better opportunity to inflict damages that may be more severe or for which the cause-effect relationship is subtler. In these situations of escalation, one party perceives an incivility as a threat to personal identity, an attack on self-worth, causing that individual to behave in ways that are more overtly aggressive. At the core is each individual's desire to save face. In times of conflict, when the appearance of strength may become very important, if an incivility is perceived as a threat to one's identity, it may lead to coercive behavior. Although we found incidents of spiral escalation to be less common than other patterns of spirals and cascades, these tit-for-tat incidents of escalating intensity can have serious detrimental consequences for organizations.

FIGURE 3 CASCADING PATTERNS OF INCIVILITY: INDIRECT DISPLACEMENT



The original incivility spiral can cascade, spawning secondary incivility spirals, which can spread the ill effects throughout the organization. We depict one pattern of this behavior in Figure 3, where the incivility is indirectly displaced through modeling. An initial uncivil encounter between Workers A and B may prompt Worker C to model that behavior, thus creating a new uncivil interaction with a new target, Worker D. The permeating nature of this pattern is notable in that it can occur even when Worker C has not personally witnessed the original encounter between Workers A and B, but has merely heard about the event.

As shown in Figure 4, secondary spirals may be spawned also as the target, Worker B, displaces the desire to reciprocate. Rather than retaliating directly against the original instigator, the target may redirect incivility toward a new target, Worker C. Similarly, Worker C may then channel the rudeness toward Worker D. An example that we heard frequently involved a superior (“A”) berating someone of lesser status (“B”), who

FIGURE 4 CASCADING PATTERNS OF INCIVILITY: DIRECT DISPLACEMENT

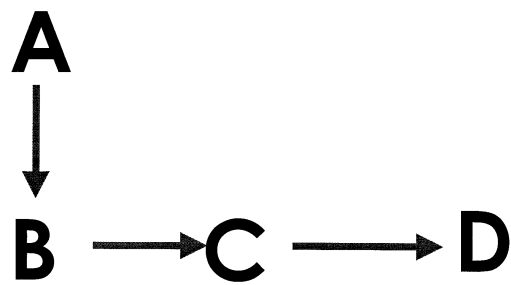
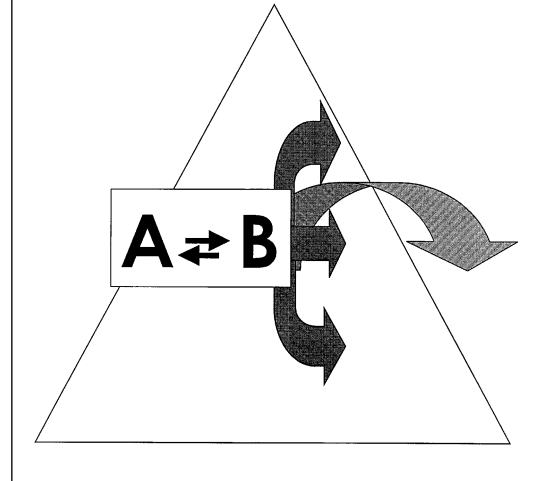


FIGURE 5 CASCADING PATTERNS OF INCIVILITY: WORD-OF-MOUTH



dared not reciprocate but, rather, redirected the desire to do so into a thoughtless comment toward another peer or subordinate (“C”), who then was predisposed to channel an additional uncivil behavior toward yet another peer or subordinate (“D”).

There are additional ways in which incivility can cascade, affecting those outside the instigator-target dyad, both within and outside the work environment. The negative impact of incivility can affect witnesses or those privy to hearsay if they value respect at work. Fellow workers or subordinates may be affected when an instigator dismisses or ridicules another’s contribution, for example. A respondent described the following somewhat typical example, “My partner and I were discussing a [strategic] issue. He thought he was right, I thought I was right. He dismissed me (and my ideas) in front of our staff by saying, ‘I’m right. You don’t know what you’re talking about.’ And then he chuckled.” As basic standards of respect are violated, the impact cascades through the organization, as depicted in Figure 5.

Also, the target may spread the impact to those outside the direct reach of the uncivil behaviors. In more than nine out of ten cases, targets described their experiences to others

inside or outside the organization (Exhibit 5). Initially, most targets take the stories home: they tell family members what happened. Also, more than half of the targets share their experiences with friends outside of work. Within the workplace, two out of three targets describe the incidents to peers; half of the targets detail the incivilities to their workplace superiors; and, about 20% pass the details down to their subordinates. Certainly, spreading such news can impact the workings and the reputation of the organization adversely. As one respondent put it, "Incivility breeds contempt, subverts legitimate authority and angers staff. Uncivil actions disrupt work patterns and they are never to be forgotten."

Fortunately, many potential incivility spirals and cascades are thwarted when one of the parties chooses to temper his or her immediate reactions. In some cases, targets reported that, after quickly considering potential ramifications, they became determined to carry on at work as though nothing had happened. A supervisor told us, "What would be the point of trying to get even? He made it clear to me that he had all the power and that he intended to use it. There was no way I could come out ahead. So, I just made myself put it aside as best I could, for my own well-being, and then I stayed out of his way." Some targets reported giving the instigator the benefit of the doubt: "She had been picked on a lot too. I tried to convince myself that she didn't really mean to offend me." Instigators, too, sometimes chose to depart from the incivility spiral. They may do so by apologizing, denying intent or offering an excuse for their uncivil behavior (e.g., "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, I was just under a lot of stress").

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Repeatedly in our investigations we found that there was little organizational understanding of the nature and costs of incivility, and scant attention to curtailing or correcting such behavior. Three-fourths of the targets

reported dissatisfaction with the ways in which their organizations handled the uncivil incidents and the aftermath, yet many of these same targets told us that they never officially reported the incident to their organizations. Also, it is important to remember that similar dissatisfaction may be felt not only by the target, but also by coworkers and bystanders. To shape an organization's attitude toward incivility, there must be shared understanding of the characteristics and negative consequences of the phenomenon. To shape an organization's response, there must be an appreciation for the costs incurred.

There are corrective and protective actions available throughout the employment lifecycle that can help to minimize the occurrence or recurrence of uncivil episodes. Actions flow from setting expectations, recruitment and selection, orientation, feedback, and exit strategies. We consider these options next.

Setting Expectations

As a baseline, expectations should be established and clarified by defining the organization's standards for interpersonal interactions, thus facilitating civil relationships and their benefits both internally and externally. Some organizations, such as Polaroid Corp., Nordstrom Inc., General Electric Co., and Quaker Oats Co., include in their core values or business strategies explicit statements regarding interpersonal conduct among employees. They may specify, for example, that intimidation, hostile or offensive behavior will not be condoned. Some, such as Nordstrom, explicitly specify the links between organizational success and the quality of relationships among employees. Others, like Quaker Oats, articulate expectations regarding employee conduct as related to consideration, respect and dignity in dealings with co-workers.

By setting expectations, organizational leaders clarify the parameters for interpersonal interaction and provide guidance for day to day conduct. All employees should understand the importance of civil, respectful interactions, as well as the negative ef-

facts that uncivil behavior will bear on the transgressors' personal success. Setting and communicating clear expectations to all employees provides the baseline against which behaviors can be judged.

Where the parameters for acceptable behavior waiver or are unclear, the low intensity and ambiguous characteristics of incivility may facilitate instigators' success at claiming innocence. Conversely, where parameters have been established, the clear inappropriateness of the behavior sets the ground for corrective action. As a manager told us, "We have zero tolerance for incivility. You have to mean it and follow through. We use a peer review board and it gets everyone's attention. . . . Incivility doesn't escalate here because we think about repercussions."

Once expectations have been established, the leader's own actions must match expectations, regardless of the organizational power of the leader or the hierarchical level or strategic importance of those with whom the leader is dealing. As leaders' behaviors are scrutinized for signals of appropriate and acceptable conduct, those who value respect among employees must conduct themselves civilly.

Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection provide additional opportunities for curtailing incivility. Expectations about personal conduct should be modeled and communicated to prospective employees. Job candidates' references should be checked thoroughly, especially regarding potential signals of previous patterns of uncivil behavior. Such discovery may require tapping into secondary referral sources, a standard practice for an international pharmaceutical corporation that participated in our research. As one of their vice presidents told us, "the inquiries take time as we establish secondary contacts and pursue leads, but there is no doubt that the investment is worth the effort in the long run. We're serious about maintaining good relationships. Hiring the right people is the critical first step."

If the candidate is to enter a job that requires supervisory responsibilities, the prospect's strengths and weaknesses should be evaluated specifically as related to "people" skills, or what has recently been cast as emotional intelligence. If these skills will be needed, interviews should include peers' and subordinates' views of relevant attributes that support a civil workplace. Once gathered, these perspectives should be incorporated to inform hiring decisions.

Orientation and Training

During orientation, organizational and work site expectations about interpersonal behavior, specifically, should be established and carefully communicated to new hires. Written policies and procedures, regarding intimidation or conflict resolution, for example, should be distributed and discussed to underscore the importance of civil conduct at work. Training to enhance such skills will also better equip employees to deal with "messy" interpersonal interactions.

The on-going organizational attention to issues of civility may help to dissuade some potential instigators from behaving inappropriately. Training and development opportunities that provide the insight and skills needed for detecting, containing, curtailing, and correcting incivility should be made available across hierarchical levels. These types of interpersonal training (for example, in conflict management, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, and so on) can enhance workers' abilities to perceive and curtail uncivil behavior before it spirals, whether they be targets, instigators, or witnesses.

Encouraging and Attending to Feedback

During the course of the employment cycle, feedback should be gathered to curtail and correct uncivil behavior. As noted, instigators tend to speak and act with cunning in the presence of superiors, thus carefully managing the impressions that they make. Therefore, to capture the full nature and im-

pact of an individual's behavior, feedback about interpersonal interactions should come not only from superiors, but also from peers and subordinates. Tools such as anonymous 360-degree surveys offer a mechanism for collecting data to provide a full view of behavior. These instruments can expose the wide (hierarchical) variance in perceptions, observations, and experiences that often exists regarding incivility. We note that care must be taken in gathering such feedback, as instigators may muster considerable resources to cover the tracks of their incivility, including intimidating bystanders or targets by threatening to use decisions and resources accessible to them because of their superior hierarchical power.

When behaviors cross the line as rudeness, insensitivity and disrespect, targets and witnesses should be encouraged to report the incident. As targets told us, there is legitimate fear that reporting such behavior could jeopardize the messenger's career, especially in settings where there is little confidence about organizational responsiveness. This risk is especially high when the target or messenger holds a position of less power than the instigator. In such cases, lack of response by organizational leaders may be doubly damaging to the target and the organization. In the best cases, the importance of the message and the courage of the messenger are heeded. As a senior officer told us, "We look at it this way. It isn't just 'your' business. If you bring it here, I'm affected too. We encourage people to recognize how widespread the negative effects can be. We follow through when reports are made."

When incivility occurs, corrective feedback should be delivered to instigators quickly and consistently. Repeated incidents of uncivil behavior, as well as those that spiral in intensity, should be documented in the instigator's personnel records. To do otherwise leaves the organization open for seemingly untouchable employees to become destructive role models. At all levels, feedback should link directly to evaluations and rewards: to correct or curtail incivility,

the personal costs of such behavior must be borne by the instigator.

Dealing with the Instigator

Where there are instigators, there may be countervailing forces driving managers to handoff these offenders. Faced with the problems that instigators can incite, their managers may be tempted to support alternative "career opportunities" for the instigators by moving them laterally or even promoting them so that the managers might rid themselves of associated difficulties. However, despite these pressures, it is vital to the organization that instigators not be recommended for transfer or promotion to positions in which they will be required to work with others. Such shuffling tends only to extend the reach of contamination.

Authority over people is a potent weapon for the instigator. If patterned uncivil behavior has developed, the instigator should be denied direct influence over others. Incivility tends to flow downward: authority facilitates committing such behaviors when powerful instigators draw on resources to control or intimidate their targets. When leaders or other role models commit incivility, it may spiral in intensity or cascade through the organization more quickly.

Organizations that condone the behavior of instigators may attract uncivil recruits. Eventually this may increase dissatisfaction and turnover among employees who value workplace respect. In extreme cases, where the instigator has developed patterned uncivil behavior, has received appropriate corrective feedback, and continues to act uncivilly, the instigator should be terminated for the best interests of coworkers and the organization alike.

Closing Thoughts

Given the hidden costs of incivility, organizations should strive to collect relevant data. Encouraging employees to report incidents of incivility and providing evidence that managers and leaders give full and careful

consideration to the reports may facilitate data collection. Despite the many organizational costs of inaction, many targets expressed concern about their leaders' reluctance to intervene when an uncivil incident occurs. Our research revealed several reasons for this perceived passivity among leaders. In some situations, the instigators' behavior and status made them virtually impervious to criticism. As the instigators' reputation for incivility spread throughout the organization, some leaders were unwilling to offend instigators and risk facing such wrath themselves. Other leaders were reluctant because they were unprepared or unwilling to address problems that reflected interpersonal tensions. For other leaders, the lack of reporting of incivility simply left them unaware: if they didn't hear about incidents that happened, how could they take corrective action? In the worst cases we encountered, leaders responded to occurrences of incivility by making excuses for powerful instigators as a means of protecting their own regime. The impact of such blindness can be devastating to the target, witnesses

and the organization at large. A supervisor characterized this impact: "When these incidents occur and no one is brought to task for their behavior, how do we find respect for our leaders, let alone enthusiasm for our organization?"

Our data suggest substantially high costs of workplace incivility, many accruing outside organizational accounting tallies. Despite special talents, those who are uncivil must be held accountable for their behavior to foster and reinforce the benefits of a respectful environment, and to curtail potential spirals and cascades that can have broad organizational reach. Rude and discourteous behavior is an organizational detriment that adversely affects the target, witnesses, and others with whom they come in contact. Astute managers and leaders have options for curtailing and correcting the proliferation of small indecencies that can lead to bad business. The stakes are simply too high to do otherwise. When uncivil incidents are overlooked, the target suffers, the instigator thrives, and the organization loses.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The study of workplace incivility is new to the management and organizational literature. For the first academic treatment of the topic that establishes the construct through multidisciplinary roots, readers might consult "Tit-for-Tat: The Spiraling Effect of Incivility in the Workplace," by Andersson and Pearson, *Academy of Management Review* 1999, July, 452–471.

Stepping outside the management literature, we recommend *Civility* by Stephen L. Carter (Basic Books, 1998, New York, NY) for broad-based treatment of the topic. For those

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