The incivility risk:
It's time to connect the dots

Consider this: If incivility is comprised of "seemingly inconsequential, rude or discourteous words and actions," it would be logical to assume, from an organizational perspective, this phenomena would be equally inconsequential, right?

Well, *Canadian HR Reporter*'s survey demonstrates the opposite is true. As seen from HR's unique vantage point, incivility is exceedingly damaging to business. An overwhelming majority of the 308 respondents "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" incivility has a negative effect on crucial organizational indicators.

First, productivity: 92 per cent said incivility has negative effects in this domain while 90 per cent said incivility has a strong negative impact on inter-departmental collaboration. Absenteeism received a score of 79 per cent and 78 per cent said talent retention is affected while 72 per cent noted the same about customer service. Furthermore, 52 per cent viewed it as damaging to the brand reputation itself.

These figures are striking, even shocking. They tell us incivility poses a tangible risk to organizations. Previous research out of the United States has pointed to a relationship between incivility and similar organizational indicators, however the survey's high figures go well beyond this. What respondents relayed is this seemingly benign form of bad behaviour comes with a hefty price tag. Customers are going elsewhere, you're having difficulty attracting and retaining talent, the cost of sick leaves is rising and your capacity to carry out the organization's objectives is severely hampered.

Given this, you'd assume organizations and HR professionals would be busy deal-

■ **ANALYSIS**

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ing with this risk head-on, equipped with the necessary skills and confidence, right?

Well, wrong again. The data point to a lack of understanding of incivility's far-reaching impact. The majority of respondents (81 per cent), "wish management was more aware of how incivility impacts the business." Furthermore, within HR itself there are large pockets who lack both confidence and skill in dealing with the issue.

When asked about their reaction when they received a formal or informal civility-related complaint, a staggering 77 per cent of respondents "wished they had more

knowledge and tools to deal with this situation." Therefore, it is no surprise 39 per cent "felt unsure of how to handle the situation" and 37 per cent did not "know exactly what to do" to fix it.

Furthermore, these professionals operate within an organizational context that is equally at a loss: 72 per cent stated they "wish they had more organizational support" to address things. Only a handful of respondents, in the open comments sections, demonstrated commendable clarity of understanding and decisiveness of action.
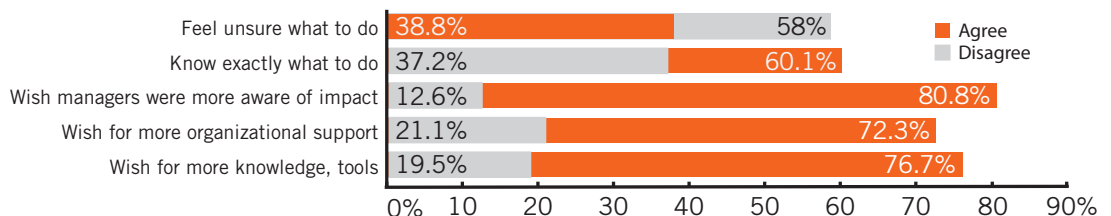
Equipped with questionable support from management and a compromised skill set, HR folks get busy revising policies (69 per cent). However, only seven per cent initiate the creation of team charters that would help employees take ownership of these revised policies. Organizations do a decent job at providing training to management (51 per cent) and front-line staff (54 per cent), but only 17 per cent create a strategic organizational response.

Only 34 per cent make it "a topic of conversation across the organization." And many, as gleaned from the comments, simply "do nothing" or deal with the issue on a case-by-case basis.

These results point to a glaring incongruence between the magnitude of the in-

■ **INCIVILITY BY THE NUMBERS**

When you receive a formal or informal complaint, do you:

	Agree	Disagree
Feel unsure what to do	38.8%	58%
Know exactly what to do	37.2%	60.1%
Wish managers were more aware of impact	12.6%	80.8%
Wish for more organizational support	21.1%	72.3%
Wish for more knowledge, tools	19.5%	76.7%

0% 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90%

civility risk and organizational responses to it. The resources dedicated to solving the problem are small in comparison to the costs associated with its impact.

The comments point to two major obstacles that get in the way of an effective organizational response to incivility. Not surprisingly, the first obstacle is senior managers are often the biggest offenders.

As one respondent put it: "It's hard to do anything about it when leaders don't realize their own behaviour hinders the organization."

The second obstacle relates to the murky nature of the problem and its multidimensionality. For example:
• "More often than not, things are said in a joking way."
• "Sometimes what was OK yesterday is not OK today."
• "Some people are perceived to have 'untouchable' status."
• "Most incidents of incivility are not brought to the appropriate personnel."
• "There are no laws about incivility so companies have no specific policies on this."

Still, this survey tells a compelling story previously not told in the Canadian landscape: Incivility is alive and well in Canada, in organizations ranging in size from one to 5,000-plus. Most HR professionals hear about it regularly (up to 15 times in a six-month period), but feel they are insufficiently equipped to deal with it. Furthermore, they operate within an environment where management often doesn't recognize the issue as a problem or, alas, is itself a major part of it.

The time is now for organizations to begin connecting the dots: Incivility is a risk that needs to be managed just like any other. It needs to be diagnosed correctly and addressed in a thoughtful way.

And it's HR's responsibility to gain the skills and confidence it needs to help its organization connect these dots and to provide leadership in implementing change.

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