Fix that broken window

Tactics to ensure incivility doesn't erode an organization

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series on incivility in the workplace. For part one, see "Workplace incivility: This molehill will cause a mountain of problems" on page 27 of the Feb. 28 issue or go to www.hrreporter.com, click on "Advanced Search" and enter article #9610.

You've seen it many times — rude, insensitive and disrespectful behaviour by colleagues or managers. It has an eroding effect on individuals, teams and organizations. It hurts commitment and leads to decreased work effort and performance. Classic incivility behaviours include gossip, social exclusion, dismissive body language such as eye-rolling, berating others in public and skipping basic social niceties such as saying, "Hello."

Incivility flies under the organizational radar — it is strongly felt but rarely addressed. When it's allowed to persist without organizational intervention, it creates the impression no one cares and, over time, becomes embedded in the culture. It's also accompanied by a rise in harassment and bullying, stress levels and absenteeism and disruptions in customer service.

Here are some ideas for successfully tackling incivility:

Have the vision. Before acting, become clear about why you want to tackle incivility and how, specifically, it will happen. Without this determination, don't even bother, because changing the prevailing culture will require significant resolve and focus.

Leverage the values. If the organization's values include ones that are relevant, such as respect and community, figure out how to leverage these in everything you do.

United we stand. Every leader within an organization needs to be on the same page. Without a uniform approach, courageous leaders who do take action could face isolation and resistance.

Model or else. Leaders from the top-down need to demonstrate the very behaviours employees will be required to follow. They'll need to be ship-shape on their "Hellos," not barge into meetings, leave their moods at the door and be super respectful when giving any kind of feedback.

Separate personality from behaviour. True, people's personalities can't be directed but an organization has both the right and responsibility to require people to be civil. People can be obnoxious or abrasive in their private lives, not at work.

Rethink the code of conduct. Formal policies are limited in their ability to create civil workplaces. Incivility is ambiguous and hard to pinpoint. Therefore, policies that attempt to prescribe body gestures, social inclusion and the like are bound to be ineffective. A comprehensive civility strategy requires an organization to update its code of conduct to reflect its expectations and commitment.

Create team charters. Every work unit should commit to terms established in its own team charter, in which people together decide how they want to treat each other. It's crucial to revisit and revise these team charters on a regular basis to ensure they are living, breathing documents.

Launch ongoing, public dialogue. Make incivility a topic of conversation and debate, both formally and informally. Discuss it in team meetings. Create task forces. Have cross-departmental debates over lunch. Have teams commit to working on one specific civil behaviour for one week or one month, then discuss it, learn from it and decide on the behaviour to practise next — then repeat the cycle.

Dedicate the time. Making the change will require time and intensity. Don't let this become yet one more project that launches with a splash and ends with a whimper. Allot time and resources in advance and assume the initiative will take more effort than originally planned.

Partner with the union. In unionized environments, bring the union on board. Together, the chances of creating lasting change are exponentially better.

See it, name it, act on it. Leaders need to promptly call people on uncivil behaviours. This requires two distinct skills — the ability to accurately diagnose incivil behaviour and the courage to comment on it, sometimes even in public.

Embed incivility into organizational processes. References to incivility should be woven into all organizational processes, beginning with pre-boarding and onboarding, through performance appraisals, ongoing supervisory conversations, salary discussions, 360-degree feedback and exit interviews.

Provide training. Provide both leaders and employees with civility-specific training. Leaders will need to learn how to model it themselves and how to call people on their behaviour. Employees will benefit from learning how to contribute to the creation of a civil environment, where everyone is free to perform at their best.

Measure. Measure how the changes show up in various organizational indicators. In terms of employees, is there a reduction in stress levels? Is there less absenteeism? Do people report a stronger connection to the organization? Do they report feeling respected at work? On the business side, look for a surge in innovation as employees become increasingly comfortable taking risks. Look for higher rates of customer satisfaction.

Broken window theory is a criminological theory that helped reduce crime in neighbourhoods across North America. It asserts when a neighbourhood window is broken, you had better fix it swiftly, otherwise, crime rates in the neighbourhood will rise, simply because people assume no one cares. Applying this theory to workplace incivility means actively keeping incivility at bay to protect an organization from more serious risks, as well as from the effects of incivility itself.

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■ **GUEST COMMENTARY**

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