

Step Away From The Stress-Incivility Tango

QUESTION: Our work environment is frequently stressful and as a result, the atmosphere is often tense and frosty. Many workers aren't afraid to speak their minds, often rudely so, and they don't seem to worry about others being offended by their comments. What advice would you have for creating a more civil work atmosphere?

ANSWER: You've obviously noticed first-hand how, when people are stressed, workplace incivility becomes a real big issue.

In the workplace, elevated stress levels are directly correlated with a rise in incivility levels. That is, the more stress there is, the more incivility you'll see.

It's simple: When you're under the influence of stress, you're more prone to be short, discourteous, and reactive. And, to boot, you become more sensitive (more "Velcro" if you will) to even the most minor incivility that emanates from others. In contrast, when your stress level is low, you are more polite, cordial and civil. You have the time (and the mindset) to be friendly and you possess the patience to accommodate other people's ways. You are more thoughtful and considerate. And if per chance you are the subject of another person's incivility, you are more forgiving and generous. You're able to brush it off more readily.

So where might your elevated stress come from? Well, its sources can be rooted in your work life, home life or both. And you may experience spillage issues: pressure at home can contribute to your work stress and vice versa. When a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness and your childcare arrangements collapse simultaneously, you may not be able to demonstrate your usual patience with a colleague who submits an error-filled report.

If you are a manager committed to boosting civility levels on your team, pay attention to people's stress levels. Ask yourself what you can do to support resilience and decrease the stressors, and then take purposeful action. Just make sure that you stay away from delving too deeply into the details of people's personal circumstances, because that might get you going places which, frankly, you as a manager have no business going to. Equally as important, as a people-leader, keep your own stress levels under check, because your pressure-induced incivility will affect your people in destructive ways that you may not be aware until much later, if ever.

Whether you are in a leadership position or not, working on your personal resilience is a good idea, any time, any day. Here are two effective meta-strategies you can use to tame your pressure levels:

1. Proactive strategies: These are comprised of the preventive behaviors and mental practices that fortify our resiliency baseline. Typical examples are sleeping at least eight hours a night, viewing events with a "cup-half-full" approach, practicing yoga or meditation, exercising

regularly and having a strong, supportive social network. Practicing these creates an invisible "immunization", thereby decreasing the chances of us experiencing events as stressful to begin with.

2. Responsive strategies: These are the strategies that we use when responding to a specific stressor (or multiple ones) in our lives. The "count to 10 before speaking" advice is a classic responsive strategy. Other examples of healthy responsive strategies include consciously challenging/replacing our negative thinking habits about the stressor, taking time to engage in deep diaphragmatic breathing, seeking support or simply saying "no."

Here is a simple tool that you might want to use when you find yourself acting out the stress-breeds-incivility cycle. I call it the S-O-S method - Stop, Observe and Shift™:

Stop: When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by stress, the "stop" step requires you to heed the warning signs and pause. Warning signs can include a persistent inner sense that tells you that something is not right, or a sense of chronic frustration and helplessness related to your inability to take meaningful action on important fronts. You might be experiencing various physiological stress symptoms, anxiety, withdrawal and an overall decline in performance. You might be curt with others or behaving in uncivil ways. All this tells you that it's time to pause and reflect on what's going on before the situation becomes unmanageable.

Observe: Here you take an honest, hard look at reality. Ask yourself tough questions, such as: what's actually happening to and around me? What specifically is troubling me? How am I acting when I'm stressed and how is this affecting my life, my health and my relationships? Am I still the person that I strive to be? If I do nothing, where will I be a year from now?

Shift: Once you've observed and gained insights into the situation, it's time to shift. Sometimes the shift is dramatic, requiring courage and significant risk-taking.

In some situations, the shift involves internal work rather than the initiation of external changes. For example, you might discover you need to accept and even embrace certain things (and people) rather than continually expecting them to change. This internal shift will liberate you from the constant obsessing over frustrating things over which you have little control.

Other times, the "shift" step may require external changes such as changing jobs or residence, letting go of relationships or commitments or making other changes that will set you on a new course and significantly alleviate your stress.

Question answered by Sharone Bar-David, president of Bar-David Consulting and a leading Canadian expert on workplace incivility, based in Toronto, ON.

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Editor's note: Are you having an issue or challenge as a supervisor that you would like us to put to a safety professional on your behalf? Send your questions to Dave Duncan, editor of Safe Supervisor at daved@bongarde.com. He will direct your questions to one of our safety experts and publish the responses in this column.