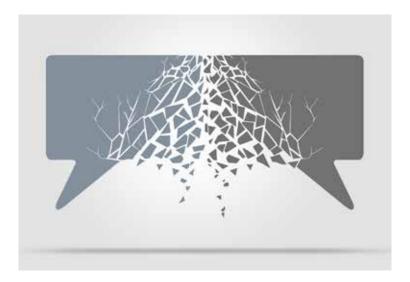# LEADERS, MIND YOUR BROKEN WINDOWS OR PAY THE PRICE OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

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Standing behind the license renewal counter, Marie turns to Sandeep at the adjacent desk for help with information she needs for the person she is serving. Sandeep provides the information, but not before first rolling her eyes, letting out a deep dismissive sigh and prefacing her answer with "Isn't this something you should know by now?" Upset and humiliated, Marie can barely finish serving the applicant. Things go downhill from there. She is distracted with the rest of the afternoon's applicants; one of them gets annoyed with her to the point of complaining to the supervisor. Back at home Marie has a sleepless night and calls in sick the next day.

The above is a typical example of workplace incivility and the type of chain reaction it can trigger. Low-intensity, seemingly insignificant behaviours that show lack of regard for others tend to fly under the organizational radar even though they take place in plain view.

Our firm's surveying of thousands of employees and managers across industries reveals that within the Canadian workplace context, the following behaviours are most commonly perceived as uncivil: not initiating or responding to greetings, eye rolling, belittling comments, dismissive body language or sounds, cliques, gossip, social exclusion, silent treatment, rude use of technology (think mobile devices), and sarcasm. In multicultural organizations, the matter of coworkers using a language that others don't understand tends to be a hot issue. And in some workplaces, profanities and swear words are cited as examples of incivility.

None of us is perfect. In fact each and every one of us has on occasion been uncivil, or at least been perceived by others to be so. The only difference between you and the next person is how frequently you engage in these behaviours and the intensity with which you do this; an occasional use of a mobile device under the table during a meeting is not the same as making it a habit to sarcastically and publicly belittle the skills of persons who report to you. The good news is that with thoughtfulness and intention we can—and should—do better.

I. THE PALPABLE EFFECTS OF INCIVILITY

Incivility is not as inconsequential as many mistakenly think. It affects performance, teamwork, innovation, customer service, engagement, retention, psychological health, and even safety. In Marie's case, she experienced a "Velcro reaction"—she got triggered and couldn't shake it off. Seminal research by Pearson and Porath reveals that Velcro-land is a place filled with primal feelings and strong reactions: a whopping 48 percent of people will intentionally lower their work effort in reaction to an incident of incivility and another 47 percent will lower the time they spend at work. In addition, 80 percent of those who participated in the research reported that they lost time worrying about an incivility incident they had experienced, while 66 percent noted that their performance declined following the event.

All this directly affects teamwork and collaboration. When people are upset with the way colleagues or managers treat them, they are unable or unwilling to work smoothly with coworkers or to strive harmoniously to achieve shared goals. Furthermore, an upset employee is prone to a range of health and safety perils. If you can't think straight, you may not operate the forklift safely. Mental health vulnerabilities (such as anxiety, depression, or elevated stress) also may be exacerbated by experiences of feeling marginalized or personally disrespected.

Innovation too suffers. Creativity depends on people's willingness to risk and share unpolished ideas. But it only takes a sarcastic comment or an eye roll from a colleague or manager to create a sense that it is unsafe to do so. And then there's the ripple effect that makes its way inevitably to the people you are there to serve—the public. Upset employees who can't think straight make mistakes, have little patience, take longer breaks, forget information, and revert to getting-even behaviours. Furthermore, as much as 25 percent of people who participated in the Pearson-Porath research admitted to researchers that they took out their frustration on a customer after an incivility event. That's one out of every four people.

II. CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Organizational contextual factors are bound to play a role in creating and even exacerbating incivility. Prime amongst these is when leaders in higher echelons engage in undesirable behaviours, thereby creating a negative modeling reverberation across the organization. In other instances, having weak organizational values (the kind that adorn the wall behind the receptionist's desk but are not integrated into the culture) leaves the door wide open to problematic behaviour.

And then there are two contributing elements that are often overlooked: first, bystanders' silence. Bystanders are incivility's best friends—their inaction allows negative behaviour to persist. People's inability (or unwillingness) to take action when they observe incivility amongst coworkers or from a manager is understandable, especially in the Canadian workplace where being nice is an unspoken ethos. They may avoid action because it requires taking a risk, or because it goes against the natural inclination to conform to what is perceived to be the group norm. A bystander might fear getting into hot water for intervening, or simply be immobilized by fear of not doing it right.

Second, incivility-enabling beliefs might be feeding the fire of undesirable behaviour in your midst without you—and others—ever pausing to question these beliefs or trace the ways in which they foster uncivil behaviours. Any group of people who work together develop a set of shared understandings that shape how they relate to one another. Many of these are positive, however some (even those that seem constructive or harmless at first glance) have a shadow side: they make people blind to the fact that certain behaviours are uncivil. A classic example is "we're like a family here": believing that we are family-like has tremendous benefits, but on its dark side this shared belief sanctions behaviours that can be outright destructive.

III. LEADERS' CONFUSION AND MISSTEPS

Leaders are human, and they make predictable mistakes that lead to unintended consequences. First and foremost, they don't think about incivility in business terms. That is, they think of it as a social dynamic issue rather than a phenomenon that translates into real and measurable impact. For example, a manager might be thinking, *I have to accept that Marie and Sandeep have not been on speaking terms since that incident three years ago. Instead of communicating directly with each other in the course of their work, they use Post-it notes or use other colleagues as intermediaries. I've tried mediating but nothing has really worked, so that's just how it is.*

Instead, the manager should ask herself: What work processes have become inefficient or skewed as a result? How is this affecting service? How does it reflect on our team and organization? How much time is wasted because of this problem? What is this costing us, in real dollar figures? Viewing the issue with this set of lenses will make it crystal clear that this situation cannot continue; you are running a business, not a social club where people can be as uncivil as they see fit. There are other ways in which leaders don't register uncivil conduct that they can and should do something about. They might attribute the behaviour to "personality" rather than to outright rudeness, or they personally do not take offense at the behaviour in question, so they cannot see how someone else would. Other times they have a personal relationship with the uncivil person that makes them blind to the behaviour, or they have become acclimatized to it because it is pervasive or built into the culture.

Fear of taking a stance is another trap into which leaders fall. These fears are fed by a general aversion to conflict, fear of getting into trouble with the union, anxiety about opening a diversity-related Pandora's box, a concern about not being liked if they take action, or feeling unsure as to exactly what to do. When managers are ineffective in dealing with incidents of incivility due to lack of awareness, knowledge, tools or the will to make this a priority, the ground becomes fertile for problems to develop.

IV. THE SOLUTION: MINDING THE WINDOWS

What if vandals broke a window in one of your neighbourhood buildings, and no one bothered to fix it? Well, according to the criminologists who developed the broken windows theory, not fixing the window in short order will result in crime rates in the neighbourhood rising over time. People will assume that no one cares, and criminal elements will become emboldened.

Workplace incivility is akin to those broken windows—the small things really do count. Therefore, creating a civil and psychologically safe organizational or team culture requires adopting an overarching window-minding approach. You need to build solid windows in the first place, establish a crew of competent maintenance and repair people and take action to fix cracks early on. If you don't, you are leaving your organization (or team) exposed to predictable risks: you might see an infestation of incivility and/or an escalation into harassment and bullying. To succeed, a multipronged approach is the way to go. Consider the following ideas, on the broader organization level as well as the front-line manager perspective:

Build solid windows

- **Develop the vision.** Work on constructing windows that best suit your needs by becoming clear on the reasons for promoting civility in the first place. Why does it matter? How will a more civil culture benefit your stakeholders? What difference will it make to service delivery? What impact will it have on key indicators such as productivity, absenteeism, collaboration and innovation?
- **Embed civility into structures and processes**. Weatherproof your windows by weaving civility into every employee and leader's journey in the organization. Tie policies and processes to it. Its significance and presence should be visible in the way you onboard people, in the supervisory relationship, performance reviews, performance management processes, engagement survey questions, coaching, and everything in between.
- **Partner with the union.** Get the union on board—civility and psychological safety are a joint interest and initiatives that promote it provide great opportunities for win-win.
- **Leverage the values.** If you have organizational values that are perceived as meaningful, leverage these in all that you do. Every leader, from top to bottom, should be continuously talking about the relationship between civility (or lack thereof) and the values.
- **Define and distinguish.** Arrive at a definition of incivility that works for you and share it broadly. Bring clarity to the ways in which incivility differs from other forms of bad behaviour such as harassment and bullying. You may find that defining and distinguishing will lead to a reduction in the number of complaints about harassment and bullying, to be replaced by less toxic complaints that focus on incivility.

Establish a competent crew

- **Model from the top**. Create an organization filled with leaders who are role models. If leaders don't walk the talk, there's no point in asking others to do so.
- **Hold abrasive leaders accountable.** It is imperative to rein in the behaviour of leaders whose interpersonal conduct creates distress in the workplace. Abrasive managers deserve to receive support that will help them change (specialized coaching is one great solution). But if things don't turn around, parting ways might be the best option.
- **Empower bystanders to become upstanders**. Upstanders—people who take positive action to do the right thing, even if they are alone in doing so—are a crucial element of any window-minding strategy. Find ways to empower bystanders to turn into upstanders. Being an upstander doesn't necessarily mean taking heroic action. In fact, it can be as simple as saying, "Hey, let's not go there!" or, "Let's not let the stress get to us. We still have to work together tomorrow!"
- **Provide tools and training.** To ensure that your window maintenance and repair crews are highly skilled, offer leaders and employees civility-specific training that develops hands-on competencies. Specifically, provide leaders with the training and support they need to become adept at identifying incivility, acting early on, and responding effectively to spontaneous or chronic situations that will inevitably arise. Ideally, every leader across the board should be on the same page, working from a shared understanding and applying consistent strategies.

Fix cracks and breakages

- **Tackle underlying beliefs.** Spend time reflecting and identifying the specific underlying beliefs that are serving to enable incivility in your team or organizational context (for example, do you hear people saying, "In our industry it's always been this way"?). Then, surface and debunk these beliefs and the negative impact they are having through team discussions and broader communications that will lead to new behaviour patterns
- **Deal decisively with chronic problems.** It's never too late to fix windows, even when the cracks are long-standing or have gone deep. Teams with persistent incivility problems can be revitalized and individuals whose behaviour is chronically uncivil can also be held to account. All too often leaders in the public service are disheartened by the belief that in a unionized environment "you can never fire anyone." If you are one of these leaders, I encourage you to rethink this. Chronic situations and chronic offenders can and should be dealt with decisively, even if the journey requires time, effort, and resources. If you don't fix it, you are sending a strong and clear message for all to see: *in our environment, it's perfectly alright to break the windows.*

The damage that incivility leaves in its wake is very real yet widely underestimated. Once you begin tracing its negative imprint, you will see clearly how crucial it is to take action to boost civility—it's good for your people and crucial to your service. After all, it's all about being a *civil* service.

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