

RUBBED THE WRONG WAY

BY SHARONE BAR-DAVID



Why abrasive employees hurt your bottom line, and what you can do about it

If you think seemingly insignificant rude actions have no real impact on the workplace, think again. Common behaviours such as eye rolling, skipping hellos and goodbyes, sarcastic remarks, and dismissive comments and body language hurt engagement and drive up absenteeism.

A 2011 survey by Bar-David Consulting and *Canadian HR Reporter* shows incivility affects key business indicators. Nearly all (92%) Canadian HR professionals agree incivility has negative effects on productivity. Eighty percent report an impact on absenteeism. And 72% say customer service suffers as a result.

U.S. academic research from 2011 focusing on both Canadian and U.S. companies shows two out of three employees experienced a decline in performance after an incivility incident. Four out of five lost time worrying about the incident. And nearly half (47%) of employees purposely lowered their effort or decreased their time at work due to incivility.

Human Nature

At first blush, these reactions might seem extreme. But have you ever experienced a strong reaction to rude behaviour directed at you? Did you take it to heart, obsess about it, lose your focus—and maybe want to get even? Rather than letting these incidents slide, many people can't let them go.

The anger and inner drive to balance an imaginary justice ledger leads recipients of rude behaviour to engage in retaliatory mini-aggression activities, such as “forgetting” to include the abrasive person in a meeting invite, making sarcastic comments to or about the person and spreading rumours. The hurt employees experience hampers their ability to do their job to the best of their abilities. They become more likely to take time off and use more benefits, such as coverage for anti-anxiety medication. People who experience abrasive behaviour are also more prone to illness—both mental and physical—because stress raises blood pressure and causes an adrenalin rush. Alternatively, these employees may show up at work utterly disengaged.

These phenomena are even more present when the perceived offender holds a position of power. In confidential fact-finding interviews, employees say things such as, *After he calls me into his office to talk about a mistake I made, I can barely work for the rest of the day. Or I have called in sick many times*


because I just couldn't face another day in the office. Yet key decision-makers are often unaware of these issues and their costs, or they turn a blind eye.

What to Do?

Here are a few steps companies can take to address incivility.

- **Define** clearly what constitutes uncivil behaviour, specifying what is and isn't tolerated. Make sure everybody in the company understands the definitions.
- **Start** from the top. If the senior leadership team is uncivil, this will undermine the efforts of managers and employees.
- **Make** it clear to abrasive leaders and employees that they need to change or they will face serious consequences, up to losing their jobs.
- **Ensure** managers have interpersonal skills—either through training or making it a job requirement when hiring—so they can address incivility early and decisively.
- **Teach** front-line employees conflict management skills to deal constructively with uncivil behaviour.
- **Encourage** frankness on all company levels so employees can bring up incidents without fear. Emphasize

that personal retaliation, whether overt or passive-aggressive, will not be tolerated and employees can receive support from people in power when conflict situations arise.

Both explicit and subtle uncivil behaviour at work has far-reaching effects on key organizational indicators. That's why it's an issue employers can no longer afford to ignore. 

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What ELSE IS WRONG?

What other problems does incivility cause in Canadian companies?

90% of HR professionals say it hurts collaboration

78% say it affects talent retention

52% say it affects brand reputation

Source: 2011 survey on workplace incivility by Bar-David Consulting and *Canadian HR Reporter*