

Why Civility Should Matter to You

by Sharone Bar-David

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Excited and a tad anxious, Joanna is about to present a new idea to her team members—she's taking a risk in offering an entirely new approach that will improve service while cutting costs. Barely two minutes into her presentation, her colleague James lifts his eyes from his mobile device and makes a blatantly sarcastic comment that dismisses both the idea and Joanna herself.

What happens next offers a glimpse into the often overlooked collateral damage that workplace incivility leaves in its wake. Replaying the incident in her mind for hours, Joanna is unable to focus on her work. She makes a sloppy and uncharacteristic mistake. She talks to others about what happened, and even ponders a getting-even strategy. What's worse, the chances of her offering new ideas in the future are close to zero.

If you are a leader in a company that relies on people's high performance, ability to risk, innovate and work collaboratively, you must put workplace incivility on your radar. The term incivility refers to low intensity, seemingly insignificant actions or words that are inconsiderate, discourteous or disrespectful. Examples include dismissing of another person's skills or contribution through words or body language (think eye rolling), gossip, sarcastic comments or even rude use of mobile devices. Incivility is tricky to identify and address because it is difficult to ascertain whether there was any harmful intent behind the behaviour.

Typically, organizations don't classify incivility as a business risk. Instead it is perceived as an irritation, an interpersonal dynamics issue that employers can't control. Unfortunately, this way of thinking is short sighted. Academic research as well as our own polling at Bar-David Consulting shows that incivility exacts a very real price. In fact research shows that as many as 47 per cent of people who experienced an incident of workplace incivility admit to purposely lowering their work effort after the event, 80 per cent report losing time worrying, and 78 per cent say their level of commitment to the organization decreased. One in four people also admitted taking their frustration out on a customer following an incident. Other research shows that after experiencing a single

incident of incivility, working groups demonstrate significantly less creativity in a problem solving assignment than groups that did not experience incivility.

Clearly, workplace incivility is much more than an interpersonal dynamics issue and taming it requires a multi-pronged approach:

1. **Mind the broken windows:** If you want to maintain a civil work environment, you need to be clear on the kind of culture you wish to have. What do you want your metaphoric “building” to look like? Equipped with the vision, you can then follow the wisdom offered by Broken Windows Theory: to reduce crime levels, you need to take immediate action to fix any neighbourhood window broken by vandals. In other words, act quickly and decisively on small civility infractions to demonstrate commitment to upholding foundational values.
2. **Model it:** Before anything else, walk the talk. Without personal modeling, you will have no credibility when you ask others to change. Clean up your own act and stop making excuses for your bad habits.
3. **Empower bystanders to become upstanders:** Bystanders are incivility’s best friends. The silence of those who witness rude conduct in their environment enables and condones the uncivil behaviour. Encourage staff to shift from being bystanders to being upstanders—people who take positive action to do the right thing, even if they are alone in doing so.
4. **Tackle incivility-enabling beliefs:** Identify and address beliefs that are embedded in the team culture and that might be perpetuating the uncivil behaviours. For example, the belief: “Given our line of work, it’s okay to vent about a frustrating colleague” ends up creating a culture saturated with gossip, rumours and cliques.
5. **Build competence and a shared language:** Workplace incivility is a relatively new term that offers a helpful way to describe what many people experience. Introduce your people to this concept through training and equip them with practical strategies to enable them to respond constructively when situations arise.
6. **Make it matter:** Implement meaningful consequences that send the message that you mean business when it comes to civility. In particular, hold accountable anyone whose behaviour has become chronically abrasive—including managers whose interpersonal style elicits distress. You have both the right and

responsibility to require staff to demonstrate regard and professionalism no matter what “personality” they possess.

Even if your team suffers from a low level of incivility, it is adversely affecting key business indicators and customer service. Nip it in the bud before issues become chronic or customers begin complaining.

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