

Workplace incivility: This molehill will cause a mountain of problems

Mirella has one of those thorny personalities that makes people go out of their way to avoid interacting with her, on a work-related basis or otherwise. Grumpy and moody, she'll give people the silent treatment for no apparent reason. Her morning greetings are reserved for a select few, while others are noticeably excluded. On occasion, she'll announce, "Don't bug me or ask me for anything today. I'm in a crappy mood."

Her eye-rolling habits are legendary. And she is a malicious gossip and rumour monger.

In another department, Rick the supervisor has some bad habits of his own. He berates employees in public for the pettiest of reasons. He is notorious for curtly shooting down any idea that doesn't meet his approval and doesn't hesitate to claim credit for other people's work. Much like Mirella, Rick can walk by people as if they don't exist. And he sees nothing wrong with barging into meetings unannounced, without the faintest apology.

Chances are you have encountered these types of behaviours and seen how taxing they can be on a work environment. And chances are you felt helpless in dealing with them despite the nagging feeling there's something fundamentally wrong. It all seems so slippery and ambiguous and it's easier to just do nothing.

A broken window

What if vandals broke a window in one of your neighbourhood buildings and it took ages before it was fixed? And what on earth, you may wonder, does this have to do with Mirella and Rick? Well, quite a bit, actually.

Broken window theory is a criminological theory adopted by former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani in his quest to create a better quality of life for residents who were plagued by rampant crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Simply put, the theory stipulates if a neighbourhood building's window is broken, it needs to be fixed immediately. If not, people will assume no one cares and, over time, crime rates in the neighbourhood will rise due to a shift in people's perception of the prevailing social order.

Giuliani began enforcing the law against a range of seemingly minor infractions, all of which until that time had been considered inevitable irritants associated with life in a big city. The police began tackling subway fare



GUEST COMMENTARY

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evaders, public drinkers and urinators, and "squeegee men." Over the next decade, New York experienced a sharp decline in crime rates that was attributed to the city's new policy. Following Giuliani's success, broken window theory was implemented in other communities, with similar results.

You have vandals in the workplace

Mirella and Rick's behaviours are no different than those of fare evaders and public drinkers. Their conduct breaks down basic norms of civility and courtesy. These behaviours have been coined "workplace incivility" and have, in the past decade, been the subject of intriguing research. Polling several thousand managers and employees from a diverse range of companies in North America about their responses to rudeness at work, researchers Christine Pearson and Christine Porath found these behaviours have significant effects on individuals, teams and organizations.

"Targets of bad behaviour get angry, frustrated, even vengeful. Job satisfaction falls, performance plummets and some employees leave," say Pearson and Porath, authors of *The Cost of Bad Behavior*. Of those who stay:

- 48 per cent of people decreased their work effort
- 47 per cent decreased their time at work and 38 per cent decreased their work quality
- 66 per cent said their performance declined
- 63 per cent lost time avoiding the offender while 80 per cent lost work time worrying about the incident
- 78 per cent said their commitment to the organization declined.

None of this, of course, is good news for an organization. And yet, incivility is alive and

well in every workplace. The fact the Mirellas and Ricks of our world may not be doing this intentionally, or the fact it is their "personality" that causes them to behave in these ways, does not make incivility less of a threat to the organizational fabric.

The problem with incivility is you cannot create effective organizational policies that will stop it from happening. A code of conduct requiring people to greet colleagues with a sunny "Hello" would undoubtedly raise some eyebrows and be impossible to enforce. The same goes for any attempt to formalize expectations around the prevention of gossip and rumours, prescribing rules related to social inclusion, outlining how to manage body language or eye-rolling, or attempting to govern when and how one should say "Sorry" and "Thank you" in the workplace.

And yet, if allowed to go unchecked, incivility can lead to the damaging results Pearson and Porath have tracked. Furthermore, if incivility persists, you're bound to see an increase in more serious undesirable behaviours, including harassment and bullying.

The solution: Fix that window

Each and every one of us, upon reflection, can find the places where we have been uncivil, albeit unintentionally. We may have excluded someone, engaged in gossip or used dismissive body language. Therefore, the place to begin is by looking at ourselves, reflecting on the possible effects of our actions, apologizing to the persons involved and cleaning the slate.

However, the bigger organizational challenge lies with people such as Mirella and Rick. More often than not, their managers have not taken any action to tackle their behaviour or the action taken was ineffective. The workplace gets bogged down by the chronic symptoms caused by these behaviours.

The solution is to apply the broken window principles to workplace incivility. There are a number of steps you can take to do so effectively, and these will be described in the March 14 issue of *Canadian HR Reporter*. Stay tuned.

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