

## 6 overlooked tips for new leaders

*Taking care of civility should top a prudent new leader's to-do list*

Civility is a game-changer. For starters, it affects absenteeism, talent retention and customer service. But browse through any new leaders' how-to course or book and it's hard to find tips that pertain directly to tackling workplace incivility or creating a harassment-free work environment.

Unfortunately, mainstream thinking holds that these matters are important only as a legal concern or an ethical issue — the fact that civil work environments are a pure business imperative is missed altogether.

So let's examine some facts: A survey on workplace incivility I designed in conjunction with *Canadian HR Reporter* in 2011 demonstrated that seemingly inconsequential, discourteous or disrespectful behaviours that constitute workplace incivility profoundly affect key business indicators.

Of 308 HR professionals surveyed, 92 per cent agreed incivility had negative effects on productivity. Close to 80 per cent stated that both absenteeism and talent retention were affected. And 72 per cent noted that incivility negatively impacted customer service.

These findings should come as no surprise. When people feel excluded or feel their dignity is being diminished, chemical changes in the body activate the brain, hijacking them into fight-or-flight mode. People lower their work effort, decrease time at work and even take their frustration out on customers. Furthermore, these chemical changes lead to distraction — and distracted workers are accident-prone.

So placing civility on the agenda is an absolute must for newly minted leaders. Here are some quintessential tips for anyone who has made the grade from staff to leader.

**Lay the ground rules from day one:** Articulate a palpable vision of your expectations as they pertain to civility and respect. Outline in concrete, behavioural terms the type of conduct you expect to see and hear. Then put in place processes for ongoing pulse checks that will prevent old habits from creeping back in.

**Walk the talk:** Now that you are the leader, people will be watching you closely. You'll



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need to conduct a brutally honest scan of your conduct and discard any behaviours that could be interpreted as rude or discourteous. If you have an eye-rolling habit, get rid of it. If you tend to be grumpy before your first coffee, have that coffee before you set foot on company property. In short, be a shining example of the expectations you had set for others.

Most importantly, always remember to say hello and good morning. Humans have a funny habit of getting upset or worried when their manager skips the morning greeting. It costs nothing to utter those words (a little smile doesn't hurt either) but will cost plenty if left unsaid. Even seemingly mature professionals will take revenge in small but meaningful ways.

**Clear the decks – or else:** Sometimes a new leader walks into a team culture that has sanctioned uncivil and even low-level harassment behaviours. Cliques, gossip, eye-rolling, belittling others' opinions, sarcasm, foul language and off-colour jokes are examples. After articulating your vision and making the new expectations known, you'll need to take action with the incivil behaviours right away (even if it means those unpleasant performance management processes).

If you don't tackle these issues, you will be inducted into the negative culture and it will be exceedingly difficult to make changes or manage performance later on. Clear the decks immediately or be prepared to learn

that what you permit, you promote.

**Don't succumb to new supervisor confusion disease:** Your unmitigated allegiance is now to the organization. Don't be confused by the belief you can maintain old friendships as if nothing had changed. If you visibly are friends with some of your employees, that will create an impression of favouritism and exclusion. In addition to the chemical changes mentioned before, the pain centre in the brain's anterior cingulate cortex activates. None of this is good news for anyone involved (including yourself). Respect and performance go hand in hand, so remember it is your responsibility (and privilege) to create a work environment where everyone can perform at their best.

**Forget about the popularity contest:** When you take on a leadership role, it's no longer about being liked, it's about being respected. You are now required to take actions that might decrease your popularity in the short term but, over the long term, earn your workers' respect. This is especially true if you were promoted from within a team because you will need to deal head-on with the problematic behaviours you observed while you were an ordinary teammate.

Bottom line — being liked is a nice-to-have but being respected is a must-have. If you want to be popular, have that need met elsewhere.

**Create a team charter:** A team charter is a powerful tool for prompting employees to grasp what is expected, buy into it and own it. A charter is a consensual document in which team members define together the norms by which they want to live as a workplace community, such as treating each other respectfully. And the good news is the manager is no longer the only person accountable for maintaining a respectful environment.

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