

4 stages of workplace incivility disease

Proper diagnosis leads to better remedies

Every workplace experiences incivility. But left unchecked, workplace incivility can become a serious disease that affects engagement, performance, customer service, safety and absenteeism. Like other illnesses, it has predictable, progressive manifestations. As you reflect on your organization or team, try assessing where you fall within this continuum.

A healthy body

In the healthy body state, the culture is, by and large, civil. When incivility occurs, it stands out as uncharacteristic and undesirable. People feel comfortable calling others out on their behaviour, and do so constructively. Those who were uncivil own their part and apologize when necessary. Matters are dealt with and people move on, sometimes even with better relations as a result of working through an issue together. Leaders model respect and are comfortable and effective in addressing problem behaviour. Overall, there are healthy internal checks and balances that rely on everyone behaving as responsible corporate citizens.

Persistent allergy

In a persistent allergy state, low-intensity incivility is quite common, but people don't tend to deal with it or resolve it. Management doesn't take an active stance to abolish it and is uncivil at times, mostly non-maliciously. This persistent allergy is often found in fast-paced or high-stress environments, where task performance takes precedence over relationships.

Despite the problems, there's a



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sense of good spirit. The status quo is tolerable. Much like a nuisance allergy, it's a constant irritant that everyone learns to live with. Life goes on, even if at a somewhat less energetic and productive pace.

But allowing this state to persist puts the environment at risk — it might develop a chronic infection or even acute disease.

Chronic infection

In this state, incivility is woven right into the culture. There is an infestation of incivility across the organization (or unit), and much of it is at high-intensity levels. Aggressive, excluding, sarcastic and getting-even behaviours are abundant. There really are only a handful of key instigators but it is hard to single them out because the environment is so deeply affected.

When the infection is chronic, there's no comprehensive organizational strategy managers (or HR) to rely on to solve the problems. People on the ground have few tools for resolving things constructively

and, therefore, attempts to address issues backfire. Management too falls short in its ability to identify problems and intervene in impactful ways.

Many staff members see themselves as victims, justifying their own uncivil behaviour. It is not uncommon for the bad behaviour to be directed towards managers too. And with a lack of organizational support, these managers are helpless, paralyzed and stressed.

To make things worse, incivility leaks into the customer interface as staff treat clients rudely or indifferently, or refer to them behind their backs in derogatory terms. Or perhaps uncivil interactions between colleagues occur in front of clients, shaping their perception of the brand.

Acute disease

Acute disease happens when management fails to tend to a chronic allergy or chronic infection — “the Wild West.” What may have started as incivility has deteriorated into harassment and bullying. Jokes can evolve into full-blown harassment based on culture, sexual orientation, gender or race. Or specific people are habitually isolated, ridiculed or marginalized. Degrading comments create a poisoned work environment, with significant collateral damage.

In this phase, management and human resources have their hands full with harassment complaints, managing sick leaves and hiring new people to replace those who have left or are on leave.

Diagnosis and remedies

Maintaining a healthy body requires attention, prevention and care. Start by identifying which state best describes your situation. Acknowledge that the more serious the disease, the more drastic the measures to take, sometimes generating short-term pain to obtain long-term strength. (Yes, you might need to let some people go.)

It all begins with modelling civility right from the top. You'll need to hold abrasive leaders at all levels to account. Identify incivility-enabling beliefs that might be pulsating beneath the surface (look for beliefs such as “In our line of work, we have no time for niceties” or “We're like a family here”).

To keep symptoms at bay, equip managers with tools to diagnose incivility and with strategies to know which remedy to apply. Staff also need to be equipped with practical tools for modelling and addressing incivility in a mature and professional way. And if you have a union, consider launching joint respect-boosting initiatives.

Putting civility on the corporate agenda can make a huge difference to business. After all, doesn't everyone perform at their best when the milieu is respectful?

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