

Guerilla warfare on the job

A look at workplace incivility, mini-aggression and the art of getting even

Your workplace is a guerilla warfare arena. When people are on the receiving end of workplace incivility, they resort to retaliatory mini-aggression, getting-even manoeuvres or outright combat.

The war often begins with the most prosaic of human interactions: Acknowledging someone's presence with a hello. You may have heard the following, perhaps many times: "Why should I say hello to Donna if she doesn't bother saying hello to me?"

When someone treats us in an uncivil way, we feel justified and compelled to apply the old eye-for-an-eye principal: If you wrong me, I'll return in kind. And so we proceed to hold back on our own greeting altogether or, alternatively, deliver a salutation to that other (rude, evil, inconsiderate) person using a sarcastic, chastising tone. While our words convey a pleasantry, our tone says, "Let me teach you those manners that your parents obviously forgot to impart to you."

The art of getting even

Getting even is intended to balance an imaginary ledger we carry in our minds. When someone's uncivil behaviour upsets us, we assess the severity of the offence and react proportionately. So when a colleague skips a greeting, we exact a punishment that is proportionate to the offence by withholding our own hello. If the first person continues to be a greeting offender, we supplement the original punishment with additional measures.

In addition to withholding the hello, in true guerilla fashion we might add a bit of gossip into the mix or a bit of work-related sabotage. In other words, a chronic offence will require an elevated getting-even response that will satisfy our



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sense we are adequately balancing those invisible justice ledgers. We might go about it in a visible way or we might go to great lengths to ensure we will not get into trouble as a result of our (often very creative) manoeuvres.

Paradoxically, when we exact justice via these ledger-calibrating activities, we are utterly blind to the fact our own behaviour is itself a form of mini-aggression that constitutes workplace incivility. The ignoring tactics, subtle (or not so subtle) sabotage, gossip and dismissive body language all amount to classic workplace incivility that, in turn, triggers a vicious cycle of retaliatory actions by the original offender.

Teflon versus Velcro

The guerilla-style tactics reflect one of two paths our minds select upon encountering incivility — there's Teflon and there's Velcro.

Here's how Velcro manifests: When we experience incivility, we are unable to shake it off. The experience permeates our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. We take it to heart, we get upset, we blame and judge the person who was uncivil. We obsess about it. We begin recalling other overlooked instances that bothered us since the day we began

working together. We spend time talking about the events to others, both at work and at home. We get angry at the other person or angry at ourselves for having allowed ourselves to be so vulnerable. We feel anxious and upset. We relive childhood memories where we were marginalized or left out. We want to get even. In short, there is nothing pleasant about visiting Velcro-land.

A Teflon attitude is an altogether different matter. Here, we essentially let another person's uncivil behaviour slide right off us as if we were shielded by a layer of Teflon, leaving us unaffected by the event.

Say, for example, Frank critiques your work in front of others. Because you have an excellent relationship with Frank and an overall positive affiliation against which you subconsciously evaluate the current situation, you may not register the behaviour as problematic to begin with. Or, if you do think of the behaviour as inappropriate, you brush it off by telling yourself this comment doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things, or that Frank intended no harm, or you have more important things to deal with.

In other words, with the Teflon shield you possess a thicker skin to begin with or, alternatively, you take cognitive action to reframe the situation in ways that help you avoid blame, hurt or a sense of victimization — you simply move on.

To clarify: Teflon doesn't mean you don't address things with the other person. You certainly might but you'll be able to do so without laying blame or coming across as an angry victim. The Teflon shield frees you to respond to situations using logic rather than raw, primal emotion.

Much of the time, most of us are

relatively Teflon-ish. We are focused on other things or give people the benefit of the doubt. But for some uncivil interactions, Velcro kicks in with full force. And when it does, none of it is positive or constructive and, more often than not, those getting-even dynamics will get activated.

The challenge and the solution

From an organizational perspective, this type of warfare on the job is bad news: Productivity and performance decline in direct proportion to the level of getting-even activities, while managers and HR folks lose time dealing with dysfunctional team dynamics and complaints. Even worse, problems can easily creep into the interface with customers.

The challenge is that even the best-constructed policy cannot eradicate this deep need to even the ledger and the behaviours it elicits. However, what you can do is create an organizational culture that encourages people to communicate openly and safely when incivility issues emerge.

You can train staff on effectively dealing with it and equip managers with tools that increase their competence for dealing with issues before they affect performance. And, finally, you can and should hold people accountable for uncivil behaviour, regardless of who started it.

Incivility breeds hostility. Hostility fosters destructive guerilla behaviour. The solution is proactive prevention.

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