

THE TOXIC WORKPLACE: INCIVILITY

Michael Durando, M.A.

Incivility appears to be an increasing dilemma for managers and employers. Although it is lower in severity than other forms of workplace aggression, incivility can lead to a number of negative individual and organizational outcomes. With more frequent experiences of uncivil behavior, employees are more likely to retaliate, are less satisfied with their jobs, and are more likely to quit. All of these can have a significant impact on an organization's bottom line. Luckily there are steps you can take to protect your organization from the toxic effects of incivility – and to decontaminate an already uncivil environment.



WHITE PAPER

QUESTAR

www.questarweb.com

How RUDE!

incivility

• noun

the quality or condition of being uncivil; discourteous behavior or treatment.

synonyms: bad/ill manners; unmannerliness, impoliteness, discourtesy, discourteousness, rudeness, disrespect, boorishness.

Someone completely ignored your email. You went to make a copy but someone had left the machine jammed with 8.5 x 11. You overheard someone talking about you behind your back – or maybe you heard them taking credit for your work. You went to the break room to get a cup of coffee only to find an empty pot. You were in a meeting and a coworker started criticizing you personally in front of the whole group.

Many of us have experienced at least a few of these. They are all examples of incivility and, as innocuous as they may seem, they can have a toxic effect on both employees and the organizations that employ them. Left unchecked, incivility can become embedded into the culture of an organization. When this happens, not only are the targets of incivility affected, but also those who are surrounded by it. Research has shown us that these toxic workplaces can leave employees hurting mentally – and even physically – and can leave organizations hurting in their pocket books.

Interest in the notion of workplace incivility has been on the rise in the past decade. Why? It might be due to the fact that incivility itself is on the rise. In fact, in a nationwide study by the nonprofit organization Public Agenda, eight out of ten

respondents say lack of respect and courtesy is a serious national problem and six out of ten believe it is getting worse. Not only that, 41 percent admit they, too, are sometimes part of the problem.

So WHAT IS INCIVILITY?

Incivility falls under the umbrella of deviant workplace behavior along with bullying, aggression and violence, and is on the low end of the workplace abuse continuum. Incivility describes behavior that violates workplace norms for mutual respect and has three defining characteristics:

- > Behaviors are typically mild in nature
- > Harm may or may not be intentional
- > Organizational level does not matter

Incivility is different from other forms of workplace violence. It is not a punch in the face, or an unwelcome advance at the office party. Incivility is more subtle than that. While physical abuse is certainly beyond the scope of incivility, uncivil acts don't necessarily have to be verbal either – although many are. It can simply be a look. It can even be the absence of a behavior (e.g., excluding someone from a meeting).

Since these behaviors are lower in intensity, it is easy to imagine how one person's view of what is uncivil might differ from another's. One employee receives a brusque email and thinks it was unnecessarily harsh and unfriendly; the sender might think it was a concise email that simply addressed a concern. Or, the recipient might believe it was an appropriate email, while the sender might believe, in retrospect, that the email may have appeared uncivil. The point is that there is a large degree of subjectivity, for both the instigator and the target, regarding which behaviors are

intentional. This conceptually distinguishes incivility from other, more overt, forms of deviant behavior that do not lack clear intent, such as bullying or “mobbing”, physical aggression, and harassment. Incivility is in the eye of the beholder.

Anyone in an organization can act as the instigator or the target. Although incivility may manifest itself as an abuse of a position of authority, this is not necessarily true for all cases. Uncivil behaviors may be directed towards supervisors, co-workers, or subordinates. This distinguishes incivility from supervisor abuse and bullying, where a power differential is assumed.

A RUDE AWAKENING

If you think of incivility as a “soft issue – no need to worry,” think again. Its effects are far from trivial. Because these behaviors can be so subtle, albeit pervasive, many organizations fail to recognize them. Few understand their negative effects, and managers and executives are ill-equipped to deal with them. Here is why you should care:

It’s everywhere

Incivility has been shown to be prevalent in the workplace. In fact, Cortina et al. (2001) found that 71 percent of surveyed employees reported having experienced incivility within a five-year time span. And it has been shown to be associated with numerous negative individual and organizational outcomes. Although incivility is lower in severity than other forms of workplace aggression, Andersson and Pearson (1999) speculate that incivility will lead to increasingly severe forms of aggression in what they describe as the “incivility spiral” that may result if targets retaliate and instigators escalate.

It’s bad for employees

Being a target of incivility can weigh heavily on the minds of employees, causing them to become preoccupied with the uncivil events, worrying about them as well as possible future events. Some targets spend less time focusing on their work and more time avoiding the instigator. Incivility can have negative effects on employees’ mental health, which can lead to physical health issues.

Research has shown that with more frequent experiences of uncivil behavior, employees are less satisfied with their jobs, think about quitting more often, and endure greater psychological distress.



It’s bad for the organization

Incivility can also directly result in negative outcomes for the organization. Employees who are the targets of incivility may intentionally decrease work efforts and decrease the amount of time at work. Furthermore, employees who experience incivility are less likely to engage in discretionary behaviors that go above and beyond the call of duty – characteristics of an engaged employee. Perhaps most pertinent to organizations is the relationship between incivility, intentions to quit and actual turnover. Cortina et al. (2001) reported nearly one-half of respondents who had been targets of incivility considered changing jobs, and 12 percent actually quit.

Incivility can also become costly to an organization in subtle ways. In addition to the price of high turnover, a less committed employee base, and other drains on productivity, consider the amount of time spent resolving conflicts at work. According to Johnson & Indvik (2001), executives may spend up to 13 percent of their time resolving conflicts – almost 7 weeks per year per executive!

...NEARLY ONE-HALF OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAD BEEN TARGETS OF INCIVILITY CONSIDERED CHANGING JOBS, AND 12% ACTUALLY QUIT

It causes toxic spillover

In a recent article, researchers have shown that not only are the consequences of uncivil behavior harmful for the targets, but they can have a negative impact for others in the work group as well (Lim et al., 2008). It is easy to imagine why working in an environment where uncivil behavior has become part of the culture would be so stressful. Even if you are not the target, you easily could be. In fact, being a witness to incivility has similar consequences to being an actual target – dissatisfaction with the job, increased turnover, as well as mental and physical health issues.

It can spiral out of control

Incivility can lead to another workplace problem, known as counter-productive work behavior or CWB. These are deliberate behaviors that hurt, or intend to hurt, either individuals or the organization itself. Examples might be avoiding work, purposefully doing work incorrectly, verbal hostility, sabotage, theft (of the instigator's or the organization's property), or lesser forms of physical aggression.

There is a clear link between incivility and CWB. But what is the nature of that link? And how do these things link to job satisfaction?

If someone is rude to you, you might get even with *them*. But our research has shown that being a target of incivility may lead to perceptions that

the organization allows, or tolerates, unfair interpersonal treatment. And if you believe the manager or employer is allowing this behavior, you might get even with the *organization*.

If acting in an uncivil manner becomes the norm, there can be serious repercussions for individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole.

Considering its significant role as a stressor, its ubiquitous and insidious nature, and its association with negative consequences, paying attention to incivility is vital.

STOP THAT, IT'S RUDE

You might have heard of the 'No jerks rule.' Or you might have heard of it by the name that replaces 'jerks' with a little obscenity that starts with the letter A. In his article in the Harvard Business Review that created the buzz around the phrase, and in his subsequent book, Robert Sutton clearly states that these 'jerks' have to go. The same holds true for uncivil behavior – it has to go.

The good news is that researchers, managers, organizations, and the general public are taking notice, and there are ways to prevent and reduce these costly behaviors. First, workplace incivility has

to be recognized by senior leadership as an unacceptable threat to the organization's performance. Once there is buy-in from the top, there are a number of things that can be done to foster a respectful working environment. Here are a few:

Measure it

There could be a problem with incivility right under your nose, and you may never know about it. People are often afraid to speak up against disrespectful behavior. They don't want to seem petty, and worry that they might be laughed at for making a big deal out of "nothing." Organizations need to be monitoring these types of behaviors. Surveys, exit interviews, and focus groups are all great avenues for employees to voice their concerns. Organizations often have systems in place that allow employees to report illegal behavior or anonymously communicate problems (e.g., sexual harassment hotlines). The same can be done here. If you don't ask, employees probably won't tell.

Get the word out

There needs to be a clear message from executives and support from managers that there will be zero tolerance for incivility. This should be communicated through several venues and should be constantly reinforced. Written statements setting clear expectations should be given to each employee. Verbal messages from top executives will help back up any written documentation, giving them more weight. A number of organizations include this type of language in their mission statements:



- > "Provide a great work environment and treat each other with respect and dignity." (from Starbuck's mission statement)
- > "We strive to show a deep respect for human beings inside and outside our company and for the communities in which they live." (from Ben & Jerry's missions statement)
- > "We trust our colleagues as valuable members of our healthcare team and pledge to treat one another with loyalty, respect and dignity." (from Hospital Care of America's mission statement)

Once the word is out, back it up. One company provides an excellent example of senior leadership's commitment to maintaining a civil environment. A programmer had missed a deadline – for reasons beyond his control – and his manager was yelling loudly at him when the president of the company walked by. The president intervened and told the employee he could take the rest of the day off. The manager was promptly let go. The president then made a point of talking individually to everyone who had witnessed the event. He told them that such behavior was unacceptable and that, if it ever happened to them, they had his permission to walk away and leave the building – no questions asked.

Educate

Whether or not incivility has reached toxic levels, rest assured, it exists in your organization. It is important to give employees the tools to act civilly. Often times, people are not even aware that their behavior has such negative



consequences. Well-targeted education and training in interpersonal skills and relationship awareness can help people recognize which particular factors contribute to their own incivility and may allow – and encourage – them to monitor their behaviors more effectively.

Don't hire 'jerks'

One of the best ways to prevent damage from incivility is to *not hire* uncivil people. Incorporate your company values regarding creating a respectful work environment into your recruiting and selection efforts. That means doing your homework before hiring – especially for positions of stature. A simple reference check might not cut it. Research shows that reference checks are notoriously poor at predicting performance on the job. If you haven't done so already, hire an industrial psychologist to design a comprehensive selection process. It is worth it in the end to spend the time screening for habitual instigators, rather than having to clean up after a trail of destruction.

Reduce the stress load

Employees who are over-worked and over-stressed may feel like there is simply no time to be nice. Stressed out employees are only thinking about themselves and what they need to get done. This can create a cut-throat environment ripe with incivility. Reducing stress levels can help alleviate some problems associated with disrespect.



If reducing the workload is not an option, there are other ways of offering stress relief. Flexible schedules allow employees to meet the demands of their jobs and still have time to deal with personal

matters. Many organizations are also offering on-site yoga, relaxation, or exercise classes. A newer trend, aimed at reducing stress, is having a “meeting-free day.” There are a number of ways to reduce the stress levels faced by your employees. The trick is finding the ones that work best in light of the culture of your organization.

No more excuses

Often times, instigators of incivility are protected. Maybe they are highly competent, highly effective individuals whom you simply ‘can’t afford to lose.’ Look at the bigger picture. How much time is spent dealing with conflicts between this person and coworkers? How many are affected by the behaviors?

The behavior should be stopped or else the cost associated with this person’s effect on the work environment will far exceed the benefits of this one employee’s specific talent. It should be treated just like any other violation of company policy – not merely a ‘slap on the wrist.’ Document the conversation including the behavior and the disciplinary action taken. If there are repeat-offenders, leaders may need to terminate them.

CONCLUSION

This line of research has practical implications for organizations. There is a clear call for employers and managers to be aware of incivility and to recognize the extent of damage it can have for both targets and non-targets. Rather than regarding uncivil behavior as a ‘fluff’ issue that employees need to resolve on their own, organizations should be actively curtailing it.

REFERENCES

- Andersson, L. M. & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24, 452-471.
- Cortina, L. M., Magley, V. J., Williams, J. H., & Langhout, R. D. (2001). Incivility in the workplace: Incident and impact. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 6, 64-80.
- Durando, M.D. (2007). It's Good to Be Bad: Potential Benefits of Counterproductive Work Behavior. *Unpublished Master's Thesis*, Minnesota State University, Mankato.
- Fox, S., Spector, P.E. & Miles, D. (2001). Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) in response to job stressors and organizational justice: Some mediator and moderator tests for autonomy and emotions, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 59, 291-309.
- Frone, M. R. (2000). Interpersonal conflict at work and psychological outcomes: Testing a model among young workers. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 5, 246-255.
- Johnson, P., & Indvik, J. (2001). Rudeness at work: Impulse over restraint. *Public Personnel Management*, 30, 457-465.
- Lim, S., Cortina, L., & Magley, V. (2008). Personal and Workgroup Incivility: Impact on Work and Health Outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 95-107.
- Martin, R. J., Hine, D. W. (2005). Development and validation of the Uncivil Workplace Behavior Questionnaire. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 10, pp. 477-490.
- Lins (2005). Dealing with workplace incivility: Does emotional labor help or hinder? *Unpublished Master's Thesis*, Minnesota State University, Mankato.
- Siegrist, J. (2005). Symmetry in social exchange and health. *European Review*, 13, 145-155.
- Spector, P. E. & Fox, S. (2002). An emotion-centered model of voluntary work behavior: Some parallels between counterproductive work behavior and organizational citizenship behavior. *Human Resource Management Review*, 12, 269-292.
- Spector, P. E., & Jex, S. M. (1998). Development of four self-report measures of job stressors and strain: Interpersonal conflict at work scale, organizational constraints scale, quantitative workload inventory, and physical symptoms inventory. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 3, 356-367.

About the Author:

Michael Durando, M.A., is an Associate Consultant at Questar. He holds a M.A. in Industrial Organizational Psychology and has worked with Fortune 500 companies, professional associations, governmental agencies, educational institutions, as well as health organizations. He is experienced in organization research and has worked extensively with employee opinion surveys.

About Questar

Headquartered in the Minneapolis metro area, Questar is one of the nation's preeminent research firms specializing in organizational research. Established in 1985, we excel in the development of specialized instruments for accurate and detailed measurement of employee engagement, leadership, and performance improvement. Whether your organizational research challenge is domestic or global, complex or straightforward, large or small, Questar can provide world-class solutions.

www.questarweb.com