

Workplace Incivility

Defining workplace incivility

Referencing the seminal work of Andersson and Person, Porath, Foulk, and Erez,ⁱⁱ among other researchers,^{iii,iv,v,vi} define workplace incivility as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential, inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct. It is important to note that incivility is all in the eyes of the beholder. It is not an objective phenomenon; it reflects people’s interpretation about how actions make them feel.” Incivility is often contrasted with more aggressive and overt forms of behavior, such as harassment (sexual and otherwise) and bullying.^{vii,viii,ix}

Examples of incivility, regardless of work setting, include answering questions in a curt manner, making a negative face in response to what coworkers say and not acknowledging the presence or ideas of others.^x There is evidence that such uncivil behaviors and several others (such as micromanaging colleagues, continuous criticism, gossiping about colleagues, patronizing behavior toward others and taking credit for others’ work^{xi,xii}) occur more often in academia.^{xiii} Incivilities in academia can and do occur among faculty themselves, between faculty and departmental staff^{xiv}, and between faculty and students (during class or office hours, for example).

Why civility is important for the workplace

Because incivility can have detrimental effects on organizations and its employees (including those who witness incivility but aren’t targets of it), it is essential that workplaces strive to institute civility for their overall well-being and productivity. Indeed, “civility constitutes an important part of the organizational climate perceived by employees, and as such, civility influences important organizational outcomes. Several meta-analytic studies have established the predictive strength of organizational context variables and, in particular, employee perceptions of organizational climate for many crucial individual-level job outcomes....Individual outcomes accumulate to shape organization-level outcomes...; this is the mechanism whereby psychological outcomes, such as satisfaction, become organizational, such as turnover and absenteeism.”^{xv}

Employees in organizations characterized by a strong sense of civility tend to experience psychological safety and, therefore, produce higher quality work. As Edmonson explains, “[I]n a psychologically safe workplace, people are not hindered by interpersonal fear. They feel willing and able to take the inherent interpersonal risks of candor. They fear holding back their full participation more than they fear sharing a potentially sensitive, threatening, or wrong idea. The fearless organization is one in which interpersonal fear is minimized so that team and organizational performance can be maximized in a knowledge intensive world....when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed. They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something. They tend to trust and respect their colleagues.”^{xvi}

What are the antecedents to the concept of workplace incivility?

Until the 1970s most researchers focused on the “deviant” behavior of employees in organizations, such as outright hostile, aggressive and threatening behavior. As Andersson and Pearson pointed out, for example, “Little research, however, has been conducted on lesser forms of mistreatment, such as rude comments, thoughtless acts, or negative gestures.... a majority of the aggression occurring in work settings is of a less intense form: verbal rather than physical, passive rather than active, indirect rather than direct, and subtle rather than overt.”^{xvii,xviii} This shift from the more overt to the covert occurred as research continued to reveal the various harmful employee- and organization-specific that can result from less obvious workplace incivilities.

Consequences of rating high on incivility measures

Workplaces plagued by unchecked incivility are likely to be characterized by lower employee productivity and creativity, lower work quality, reduced satisfaction, decreased capacity to concentrate/perform other cognitive functions, weaker indicators of psychological health, more absenteeism, and higher turnover rates.^{xix,xx,xxi,xxii,xxiii,xxiv,xxv,xxvi,xxvii,xxviii,xxix} In an intriguing study of the negative effects of incivility on employees, “when asked what to do with a brick, participants who had been treated badly proposed logical but not particularly imaginative activities, such as ‘build a house,’ ‘build a wall,’ and ‘build a school.’ We saw more sparks from participants who had been treated civilly; their suggestions included ‘sell the brick on eBay,’ ‘use it as a goalpost for a street soccer game,’ ‘hang it on a museum wall and call it abstract art,’ and ‘decorate it like a pet and give it to a kid as a present.’^{xxx}

In the context of academia, “nursing faculty” in an academic medical center “who were victims of faculty incivility often felt humiliated, isolated, and alienated from both colleagues and their programs. Other faculty responses to uncivil behaviors included feeling fearful, defenseless, and trapped.” Student responses to witnessing faculty-faculty incivility or experiencing direct faculty incivility can result in the “decreased ability to learn and apply learning in clinical settings,” may “interfere with the quality of training they receive and hinder their ability to treat patients successfully,” and, ultimately, result in program attrition. Finally, programs marred by incivility might harm their own or their universities’ reputations. Moreover, both current and prospective faculty and students might seek to work or study elsewhere.^{xxxi}

In academic settings other than healthcare, faculty incivility toward students in the classroom/lecture hall has had notable effects. For example, “higher levels of incivility were negatively associated with [student] attachment to the academic institution and sense of respect toward it...[and students]...experienced stress, felt disrespected, unprotected and helpless.” As a consequence, students “avoided interaction with the perpetrator, reduced their help-seeking behaviors and, in general, disconnected themselves from the learning process.”^{xxxii,xxxiii}

Practices to increase ratings of workplace civility in academia

Although there are important qualities of academia that make it distinct from other kinds of workplaces, the strategies for enhancing workplace civility while simultaneously decreasing incivility are the same as those in the general business/organizational literature. The following relevant practices presented are from the work of Pearson and Porath^{xxxiv} because they are the most comprehensive. However, many of the individual practices can be found in many other sources.^{xxxv,xxxvi,xxxvii,xxxviii,xxxix,xl,xli,xlii}

Practice	Explanation
Set zero-tolerance expectations.	Leadership regularly makes it very clear that workplace incivility is strictly prohibited and will be met with negative consequences.
Take an honest look in the mirror.	All those in leadership positions should conduct an honest self-assessment about whether they are modeling the types of behaviors they wish their employees to display.
Weed out trouble before it enters your organization.	As part of the hiring process, conduct a thorough investigation of candidates to determine whether they have a history of uncivil behavior in the workplace.
Teach civility.	Offer trainings and other creative exercises to demonstrate for employees the type of behavior that’s desired.
Put your ear to the ground and listen carefully.	Creating safe reporting channels to gauge who in the organization might be an instigator of workplace incivility so it can be addressed.
When incivility occurs, hammer it.	When anyone in a position of authority learns of workplace incivility in the organization it should be responded to and dealt with immediately, rather than letting it continue.
Don’t make excuses for powerful instigators.	Ensure that employees who have organizational authority or high productivity are not exempted from the organization’s policies regarding workplace incivility.

Resources and readings

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