

# Harvard Business Review

MOTIVATING PEOPLE

## The Price of Incivility

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FROM THE JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2013 ISSUE



**R**udeness at work is rampant, and it's on the rise. Over the past 14 years we've polled thousands of workers about how they're treated on the job, and 98% have reported experiencing uncivil behavior. In 2011 half said they were treated rudely at least once a week—up from a quarter in 1998.

The costs chip away at the bottom line. Nearly everybody who experiences workplace incivility responds in a negative way, in some cases overtly retaliating. Employees are less creative when they feel disrespected, and many get fed up and leave. About half deliberately decrease their effort or lower the quality of their work. And incivility damages customer relationships. Our research shows that people are less likely to buy from a company with an employee they perceive as rude, whether the rudeness is directed at them or at other employees. Witnessing just a single unpleasant interaction leads customers to generalize about other employees, the organization, and even the brand.

We've interviewed employees, managers, HR executives, presidents, and CEOs. We've administered questionnaires, run experiments, led workshops, and spoken with doctors, lawyers, judges, law enforcement officers, architects, engineers, consultants, and coaches about how they've faced and handled incivility. And we've collected data from more than 14,000 people throughout the United States and Canada in order to track the prevalence, types, causes, costs, and cures of incivility at work. We know two things for certain: Incivility is expensive, and few organizations recognize or take action to curtail it.

In this article we'll discuss our findings, detail the costs, and propose some interventions. But first, let's look at the various shapes incivility can take.

## **Forms of Incivility**

We've all heard of (or experienced) the "boss from hell." The stress of ongoing hostility from a manager takes a toll, sometimes a big one. We spoke with a man we'll call Matt, who reported to Larry—a volatile bully who insulted his direct reports, belittled their efforts, and blamed them for things over which they had no control. (The names in this article have been changed and the identities disguised.) Larry was

rude to customers, too. When he accompanied Matt to one client's store, he told the owner, "I see you're carrying on your father's tradition. This store looked like sh-then. And it looks like sh- in your hands."

Matt's stress level skyrocketed. He took a risk and reported Larry to HR. (He wasn't the first to complain.) Called on the carpet, Larry failed to apologize, saying only that perhaps he "used an atomic bomb" when he "could have used a flyswatter." Weeks later Larry was named district manager of the year. Three days after that, Matt had a heart attack.

The conclusion of Matt's story is unusual, but unchecked rudeness is surprisingly common. We heard of one boss who was so routinely abusive that employees and suppliers had a code for alerting one another to his impending arrival ("The eagle has landed!"). The only positive aspect was that their shared dislike helped the employees forge close bonds. After the company died, in the late 1990s, its alums formed a network that thrives to this day.

In some cases an entire department is infected. Jennifer worked in an industry that attracted large numbers of educated young professionals willing to work for a pittance in order to be in a creative field. It was widely accepted that they had to pay their dues. The atmosphere included door slamming, side conversations, exclusion, and blatant disregard for people's time. Years later Jennifer still cringes as she remembers her boss screaming, "You made a mistake!" when she'd overlooked a minor typo in an internal memo. There was lots of attrition among low-level employees, but those who did stay seemed to absorb the behaviors they'd been subjected to, and they put newcomers through the same kind of abuse.

Fran was a senior executive in a global consumer products company. After several quarters of outstanding growth despite a down economy, she found herself confronted by a newcomer in the C-suite, Joe. For six months Fran had to jump through hoops to defend the business, even though it had defied stagnation. She never got an explanation for why she was picked on, and eventually she left, not for another job but to escape what she called “a soul-destroying experience.”

Incivility can take much more subtle forms, and it is often prompted by thoughtlessness rather than actual malice. Think of the manager who sends e-mails during a presentation, or the boss who “teases” direct reports in ways that sting, or the team leader who takes credit for good news but points a finger at team members when something goes wrong. Such relatively minor acts can be even more insidious than overt bullying, because they are less obvious and easier to overlook—yet they add up, eroding engagement and morale.

## **The Costs of Incivility**

Many managers would say that incivility is wrong, but not all recognize that it has tangible costs. Targets of incivility often punish their offenders and the organization, although most hide or bury their feelings and don’t necessarily think of their actions as revenge. Through a poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries, we learned just how people’s reactions play out. Among workers who’ve been on the receiving end of incivility:

- 48% intentionally decreased their work effort.
- 47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work.
- 38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work.

- 80% lost work time worrying about the incident.
- 63% lost work time avoiding the offender.
- 66% said that their performance declined.
- 78% said that their commitment to the organization declined.
- 12% said that they left their job because of the uncivil treatment.
- 25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers.

Experiments and other reports offer additional insights about the effects of incivility. Here are some examples of what can happen.

### **Creativity suffers.**

In an experiment we conducted with Amir Erez, a professor of management at the University of Florida, participants who were treated rudely by other subjects were 30% less creative than others in the study. They produced 25% fewer ideas, and the ones they did come up with were less original. For example, 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.”

### **Performance and team spirit deteriorate.**

Survey results and interviews indicate that simply witnessing incivility has negative consequences. In one experiment we conducted, people who'd observed poor behavior performed 20% worse on word puzzles than other people did. We also found that witnesses to incivility were less likely than others to help out, even when the person they'd be helping had no apparent connection to the uncivil person: Only 25% of the subjects who'd witnessed incivility volunteered to help, whereas 51% of those who hadn't witnessed it did.

**People are less likely to buy from a company with an employee they perceive as rude, even if the rudeness isn't directed at them.**

### **Customers turn away.**

Public rudeness among employees is common, according to our survey of 244 consumers. Whether it's waiters berating fellow waiters or store clerks criticizing colleagues, disrespectful behavior makes people uncomfortable, and they're quick to walk out without making a purchase.

We studied this phenomenon with the USC marketing professors Debbie MacInnis and Valerie Folkes. In one experiment, half the participants witnessed a supposed bank representative publicly reprimanding another for incorrectly presenting credit card information. Only 20% of those who'd seen the encounter said that they would use the bank's services in the future, compared with 80% of those who hadn't. And nearly two-thirds of those who'd seen the exchange said that they would feel anxious dealing with *any* employee of the bank.

What's more, when we tested various scenarios, we found that it didn't matter whether the targeted employee was incompetent, whether the reprimand had been delivered behind closed doors (but overheard), or whether the employee had done something questionable or illegal, such as park in a handicapped spot. Regardless of the circumstances, people don't like to see others treated badly.

### **Managing incidents is expensive.**

HR professionals say that just one incident can soak up weeks of attention and effort. According to a study conducted by Accountemps and reported in *Fortune*, managers and executives at *Fortune* 1,000 firms spend 13% percent of their work time—the equivalent of seven weeks a year—mending employee relationships and otherwise dealing with the aftermath of incivility. And costs soar, of course, when consultants or attorneys must be brought in to help settle a situation.

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### **What's a Leader to Do?**

It can take constant vigilance to keep the workplace civil; otherwise, rudeness tends to creep into everyday interactions. Managers can use several strategies to keep their own behavior in check and to foster civility among others.

#### **Managing yourself.**

Leaders set the tone, so you need to be aware of your actions and of how you come across to others.

#### **Model good behavior.**

In one of our surveys, 25% of managers who admitted to having behaved badly said they were uncivil because their leaders—their own role models—were rude. If employees see that those who have climbed the corporate ladder tolerate or embrace uncivil behavior, they're likely to follow suit. So turn off your iPhone during meetings, pay attention to questions, and follow up on promises.

One way to help create a culture of respect and bring out your employees' best is to express your appreciation. Personal notes are particularly effective, especially if they emphasize being a role model, treating people well, and living the organization's values. Doug Conant, a former CEO of Campbell Soup, is well aware of the power of personal recognition. During his tenure as president and CEO, he sent more than 30,000 handwritten notes of thanks to employees.

### **Ask for feedback.**

You may need a reality check from the people who work for you. A manager at Hanover Insurance decided to ask his employees what they liked and didn't like about his leadership style. He learned that it really bothered them when he glanced at his phone or responded to e-mail during meetings. He now refrains from those activities, and his team appreciates the change.

Employees won't always be honest, but there are tools you can use on your own. For example, keep a journal in which you track instances of civility and incivility and note changes that you'd like to make.

### **Pay attention to your progress.**

As Josef, an IT professional, learned more about incivility, he became aware of his tendency to disparage a few nasty colleagues behind their backs. "I hadn't thought about it much until I considered the negative role modeling I was doing," he told us. "I criticized only people who were obnoxious to others and shared my criticisms only



with people I trusted and in private, and somehow that made it seem OK. Then I started thinking about how I was just adding to the divide by spreading gossip and creating ‘sides.’ It was a real eye-opener, and I decided that I wanted to set a better example.”

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Within a short time Josef noticed that he was logging fewer occasions when he gossiped negatively and that he felt better about himself and his workplace. “I don’t know whether anyone else would notice a difference—people already thought I was fair and supportive—but I know that I’ve changed,” he said. “And there’s another benefit for all of us: I’m seeing less

incivility around me. I think that speaking up when colleagues or subordinates are rude can really make a difference. It puts them on alert that somebody is watching and cares how everyone is treated.”

### **Managing the organization.**

Monitoring and adjusting your own behavior is an important piece of the puzzle, but you need to take action across the company as well.

### **Hire for civility.**

Avoid bringing incivility into the workplace to begin with. Some companies, including Southwest Airlines and Four Seasons, put civility at the fore when they interview applicants.

It's useful to give your team members a say about their prospective colleagues; they may pick up on behavior that would be suppressed in more-formal interviews. Rhapsody, an online subscription music service, conducts group interviews so that employees can evaluate potential teammates. It has been known to turn down applicants who are strong on paper but make the team uncomfortable in some way. In one case, a team considering two applicants felt that the apparently stronger one lacked emotional intelligence: She talked too much and seemed unwilling to listen. So the company hired the other candidate, who has worked out very well.

### Taking Civility Global

Research about cross-cultural relationships tends to yield highly detailed laundry lists of dos and don'ts. Popular recommendations typically focus on nonverbal considerations such as the proper depth of a bow, how to position your feet so that you don't show the soles of your shoes, or the number of kisses that are appropriate when greeting. Some of these guidelines are useful, but many are outdated, and most are not transferable from one culture to another.

We suggest a more universal approach. Simply put, the key is civility. Learning how to read behavior and to react respectfully across cultures has tremendous payoffs. The same skill set applies wherever in the world your business takes you.

#### **Before you go:**

**Reflect on your own culture**

Only 11% of organizations report considering civility at all during the hiring process, and many of those investigate it in a cursory fashion. But incivility usually leaves a trail of some sort, which can be uncovered if someone's willing to look. One hospital had a near miss when bringing on a new radiologist. It offered the job to Dirk, a talented doctor who came highly recommended by his peers and had aced the interviews. But one assistant in the department had a hunch that something was off. Through a network of personal contacts, she learned that Dirk had left a number of badly treated subordinates in his wake—information that would never have surfaced from his CV. So the department head nixed the hire, telling Dirk that if he accepted the offer,

and especially on the stereotypes, biases, and idiosyncrasies that others may look for in you.

### **Become knowledgeable about where you're going.**

Read about it in your favorite genre—history, biography, fiction, international newspapers, and so on. Learn basic expressions of civility such as “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me” in the language of your hosts. Watch movies set in the locale. Ask people familiar with the culture for briefings. But don't believe everything you hear: One consequence of our fast-paced global world is that behavioral norms, like many other things, shift rapidly.

### **Adopt an open mind-set.**

Plan to try out new ideas and behaviors.

### **Once you're there:**

#### **Show respect.**

Intent goes a long way, and most people will be able to decipher your intentions quickly, even across cultures.

#### **Be agreeable**

toward everyone you encounter.

#### **Remember that you may be pricklier than usual,**

because you're outside your routines. Practice greater patience with others and with yourself. Suspend judgment of anything or anyone for as long as you can.

the hospital would let him go right away, which would raise a flag for potential employers.

### **Teach civility.**

We're always amazed by how many managers and employees tell us that they don't understand what it means to be civil. One quarter of the offenders we surveyed said that they didn't recognize their behavior as uncivil.

People can learn civility on the job. Role-playing is one technique. At one hospital in Los Angeles, temperamental doctors have to attend “charm school” to decrease their brashness (and reduce the potential for lawsuits). Some organizations offer classes on managing the generation mix, in which they talk about differences in norms of civility and how to improve behavior across generations.

Video can be a good teaching tool, especially when paired with coaching. Film employees during various interactions so that they can observe their own facial expressions, posture, words, and tone of voice. It takes people a while

**Pay sharp attention.**

Put your senses on alert: Listen and observe more carefully. Focus not only on what you hear and see, but also on the context of words and actions.

**Venture outside your comfort zone**

to learn more quickly.

**Adapt your behavior to fit in**

as best you can—but don't step over the line by trying to “go native.”

**Catch, laugh about, and learn from your missteps.**

Even significant faux pas are usually forgiven if accompanied by sincere expressions of goodwill. One way to show that you mean well is to attempt a few words in the local language.

to learn to ignore the camera, but eventually they resume their normal patterns of behavior.

After participating in such an exercise, the CEO of a medical firm told us, “I didn't realize what a jerk I sounded like.” To his credit, he used the insight to fashion more-civil communication—and became less of a jerk. Another senior executive reported that he'd always thought he maintained a poker face, but the video revealed obvious “tells.” For instance, if he lost interest in a discussion, he'd look away.

We recommend that after being taped, people watch the video in three modes: first, with both sound and image, to get an

overall sense of their demeanor; second, without sound, to focus on nonverbal behaviors such as gestures, distancing, and facial expressions; and third, with only sound, to highlight tone of voice, volume and speed of speech, and word choice. People don't take issue just with words; tone can be equally or more potent.

**Create group norms.**

Start a dialogue with your team about expectations. An insurance executive told us that he'd talked with his team about what behaviors worked and what didn't. By the end of the first meeting, the team had produced and taken ownership of concrete norms for civility, such as arriving on time and ignoring e-mail during meetings.

In one of our own workplaces, we've borrowed a practice from sports to take the edge off and to help one another avoid falling into occasional abrasiveness. In our world, incivility can flare up during presentations, because overly zealous professors may vigorously interrogate colleagues and visiting professors in an effort to demonstrate their own intellect. We warn colleagues who are engaging in this behavior by using hand signals to indicate the equivalent of soccer's yellow and red cards. The "yellow card" sign (a fist raised to the side of the head) conveys a warning, letting the interrogator know she needs to think about the phrasing, tone, and intensity of her comments and questions. The "red card" signal (two fingers held up, followed by the classic heave of the thumb) means she's finished for the session—she's been so offensive, repeatedly and after fair warning, that she needs to be "ejected from the game." Faculty members have learned that when they get the red card signal, they have to button it—no more today.

Ochsner Health System, a large Louisiana health care provider, has adopted what it calls "the 10/5 way": If you're within 10 feet of someone, make eye contact and smile. If you're within five feet, say hello. Ochsner has seen greater patient satisfaction and an increase in patient referrals as a result.

## **Reward good behavior.**

Collegiality should be a consideration in every performance review, but many companies think only about outcomes and tend to overlook damaging behaviors. What behavior does your review system motivate? All too often we see organizations badly miss the mark. They want collaboration, but you'd never know it from their evaluation forms, which focus entirely on individual assessment, without a single measure of teamwork.

Zappos implemented a “Wow” recognition program designed to capture people in the act of doing the right thing. Any employee at any level who sees a colleague doing something special can award a “Wow,” which includes a cash bonus of up to \$50. Recipients are automatically eligible for a “Hero” award. Heroes are chosen by top executives; they receive a covered parking spot for a month, a \$150 Zappos gift card, and, with full symbolic flair, a hero’s cape. Even lighthearted awards like these can be powerful symbols of the importance of civility.

**Any Zappos employee who sees a colleague doing something special can award a “Wow,” which includes a cash bonus of up to \$50.**

### **Penalize bad behavior.**

Even the best companies occasionally make bad hires, and employees from an acquired firm may be accustomed to different norms. The trick is to identify and try to correct any troublesome behavior. Companies often avoid taking action, though, and most incidents go unreported, partly because employees know nothing will come of a report. If you want to foster respect, take complaints seriously and follow up.

Rather than confronting offenders, leaders often opt for an easier solution—moving them to a different location. The result is predictable: The behavior continues in a new setting. One manager told us that his department has been burned so often that it no longer considers internal candidates for managerial positions.

Sometimes the best path is to let someone go. Danny Meyer, the owner of many successful restaurants in Manhattan, will fire talent for uncivil behavior. Gifted but rude chefs don't last at his restaurants because they set off bad vibes. Meyer believes that customers can *taste* employee incivility, even when the behavior occurs in the kitchen.

Many top law firms, hospitals, and businesses we've dealt with have learned the hard way that it simply doesn't pay to harbor habitual offenders, even if they're rainmakers or protégés. Whether offenders have caused multimillion-dollar lawsuits or been responsible for the exit of throngs of employees, often the losses could have been mitigated by early, resolute action. A senior executive of a highly successful company told us recently, "Every mistake we've made in firing a questionable hire was in taking action too late, not too early."

## **Conduct postdeparture interviews.**

Organizational memory fades quickly. It's crucial, therefore, to gather information from and reflect on the experiences and reactions of employees who leave because of incivility. If you ask targets during their exit interviews why they're leaving, you'll usually get only vague responses. Interviews conducted six months or so later can yield a truer picture. Talking with former employees after they've distanced themselves from the organization and settled into their new work environments can give you insights about the violations of civility that prompted them to leave. Companies we've worked with calculate that the tab for incivility can run into the millions. Some years back Cisco put together a detailed estimate of what incivility was costing the company. It factored in its reputation as a consistently great place to work, assumed an extremely low probability of rudeness among its employees, and looked at only three potential costs. Even in this exemplary workplace, it was estimated that incivility cost \$12 million a year. That realization led to the creation of Cisco's global workplace civility program.

We close with a warning to those who think consistent civility is an extravagance: Just one habitually offensive employee critically positioned in your organization can cost you dearly in lost employees, lost customers, and lost productivity.

A version of this article appeared in the January–February 2013 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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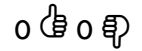


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**Nancy Barcalow** 6 months ago

I could not agree more with this article. However, I have witnessed situations where "bullies" were allowed to continue their behavior because they were responsible for increasing the company's bottom line. The short-term financial gains of their behavior hid the long-term damage to other employees and the company, and the disintegration of the corporate culture.

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