



## INCIVILITY *in the* WORKPLACE

By Nancy Boyle | EAP Trainer | The Village Business Institute

Flight attendants struggle to control passengers flying into a rage. Frustrated staff and irate patrons go head-to-head while smartphone cameras record it all. Employees feel belittled or harassed by supervisors to the point of legal action.

Headlines like these reveal the extent of incivility in the workplace.

Research has shown that incivility continues to rise amid the pandemic. Uncivil behavior at work can be overt or subtle. Examples include:

- Criticizing someone in public
- Rude or obnoxious behavior
- Withholding important information
- Arriving late to a meeting
- Checking email or texting during a meeting
- Ignoring or interrupting a colleague

Incivility can mean different things to different people, so it can be easily overlooked or missed.

“Incivility is typically ambiguous and not very intense, but it has harmful effects all the same,” said Lauren Park, a recent Ph.D. graduate in industrial-organizational psychology who now works as an HR research scientist.

So what can organizations do to begin to create a culture of civility?

### WHAT IS CIVILITY?

Let’s first define what civility is. Tomas Spath and Cassandra Dahnke, founders of the Institute for Civility in Government, share the following:

“Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. Civility begins with us.”

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As we can see, civility takes action. It requires humility and a willingness to take an honest look at our own actions, attitudes, biases, and perceptions. What is holding us back from taking this honest look?

A 2017 article from HR Magazine entitled “The Age of Rage” shared a survey in which 74% of respondents stated that civility had declined in the previous four years; 70% of respondents stated incivility had risen to crisis levels. In that same study, respondents reported that 25% of their bosses were rude, and 40% of respondents stated they didn’t have time to be nice. These statistics are alarming ... How do we not have time to be nice?!

## WHAT CAUSES INCIVILITY?

We need to understand what is causing incivility. A recent study by Portland State University, published by The Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, found that “employees who experience or witness incivilities are more likely to be uncivil to others – a worrying trend that could intensify as people return to in-person work.”

“People have gotten used to not having to engage in interpersonal communication as much, and that can take an already distressing or tense situation and exacerbate it because people are out of practice of not having to have difficult conversations,” said Larry Martinez, associate professor of

## MAKE EXPECTATIONS CLEAR

It’s important for supervisors to establish clear expectations surrounding behavior that is desired in the workplace. Communicate with your employees what types of behaviors are discouraged or unacceptable.

Discouraged behaviors may make others feel uncomfortable or degrade the company culture. Examples could include:

- Sarcasm
- Interrupting people
- Interrupting another’s work with long personal stories
- Taking non-urgent calls during a meeting
- Dominating meetings
- Gossiping
- Temper tantrums
- Workplace conversations about hot topics

Unacceptable behaviors may violate company policies or create a hostile work environment. These may include:

- Ridiculing and humiliating others
- Name-calling
- Being overly familiar
- Using obscenities
- Offensive and controversial gestures
- Invading people’s personal space
- Coming to work with a contagious illness

## MODELING DESIRED BEHAVIOR

As a supervisor, it’s important to take a look at our own behavior to ensure it is setting a good example in the workplace:

- Are you **polite** to your co-workers? Do you make the simple gestures of saying hello, recognizing people by name, smiling? Being courteous is not a sign of weakness. It’s actually a sign of sophistication and leadership.
- Do you rule by **intimidation**? Are employees and co-workers afraid to approach you with ideas and solutions to problems?
- Do you follow the **cardinal rule** of “praising in public and admonishing in private”?

CIVILITY	INCIVILITY
Going out of your way to help someone	Failing to return phone calls, voicemails, emails
Acknowledging your mistakes and making appropriate amends	“Humorous” put-downs, eye rolling, heavy sarcasm, derogatory remarks
Saying “please” and “thank you”	Not keeping appointments
Using a positive tone of voice	Interrupting conversations or meetings
Filling the copier with paper after using the last piece	Yelling, phone slamming, fist pounding, spitting, throwing objects
Apologizing when you do something that offends someone	Chipping away at someone’s self-esteem through constant slights
Refusing to participate in gossip	Ignoring others and their opinions
Showing respect for other people’s feelings and opinions	Addressing people in an unprofessional manner

- Do you discuss **private** issues such as salaries, vacation time, etc., in private?
- Do you lose your **temper**? Use profanity? Slam the door?
- Do you **know the names** of the people you work with on a daily basis? Consider nameplates for everyone’s desk. Do you ask how a coworker or an employee is doing? How her family is? When people feel valued, they feel more invested in their work and their company.
- Do you **encourage acceptance**? We all have a duty to keep an open mind, allow ourselves to be exposed to another viewpoint, and make a genuine effort to find out what is beneficial about that differing view.

**Have an employee situation you’re not sure how to handle?** The Village EAP provides you unlimited access to the Supervisor Helpline. The helpline is staffed by trained professionals who can consult with you on a variety of human resource and workplace issues. Simply call 1-800-627-8220 between 8 am and 5 pm Monday through Friday and ask for The Village EAP Supervisor Helpline.

industrial-organizational psychology and co-author of the Portland State University study. “These spirals that we’re seeing might be stronger in a post-pandemic world.”

Park and Martinez’s study is the first comprehensive review of its kind to analyze the factors that predict uncivil behavior in workplaces. They focused on the instigator’s perspective to better understand incivility and how to stop it at its source.

Among the findings:

- Employees who have **more control over their jobs** are less likely to reciprocate incivility. Researchers suggest that employees with greater job control have more freedom in deciding when and how their work tasks are completed, offering them the time and energy to seek social or organizational support, mentally and/or physically detach from work, reflect on the situation, or confront their uncivil colleague.
- Employees whose **immediate team or workgroup** engages in more civil behavior are less likely to reciprocate incivility.
- **Older employees** are less likely to reciprocate incivility.

## IMPACT OF REMOTE WORK

In a remote-working world, Park and Martinez said incivility could more easily go unchecked as people hide behind Zoom boxes or chat messages. It can be difficult to discern intent from text without body language or tone of voice. Even as people return to work, organizations may choose to adopt a hybrid model where employees may only come in for team-based work.

“There will inevitably be some conflict as people might be meeting coworkers in person for the first time or they’ll be working together again in the same physical space,” Martinez said. “Relationships will need to be renegotiated in different kinds of ways and the likelihood that people are going to be able to address these situations in a conducive manner as compared to before the pandemic will decrease.”

## SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES

Park said it’s key that organizations provide support to employees who’ve experienced incivility.

“They’re at a high risk of starting these vicious cycles,” she said. “Providing support is not only the right thing to do but it stops that behavior from spiraling through the organization.”

Martinez added that complaints about uncivil behavior shouldn’t be discounted, and organizations should have **policies and practices in place** that take incidents seriously and address them in a way that curtails them from continuing.

In response to the realities of incivilities in the workplace, the focus needs to be in how they can create a culture of civility and respect in an organization. This means **modeling and enforcing appropriate communication and conduct** within the organization. When problems arise, such as disrespectful or uncivil behavior, these should be addressed in an effective and timely fashion. When it comes to communication, it’s important that all written and verbal communication is civil and respectful, includes non-discriminatory and inclusive language, and respects confidentiality and personal information.



Organizations may want to look at their **hiring practices and interview questions** to ensure they are hiring people who embody respect, who have high emotional intelligence, and are humble. Interviewing those who left the organization to find out why can also reveal potential problems with incivility.

Organizations can also focus on creating a **culture of accountability and respect** in which it becomes the norm to address issues immediately and consistently. One way to achieve this is by providing opportunities to coach leaders, managers, and employees on how to be civil and respect others.

*Reference: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/08/210810121051.htm>*



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