

The Price of Incivility: Bad behavior costs businesses billions

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Work-life Columnist

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We all know what it feels like — the sense of humiliation when a manager berates you for no apparent reason in front of your coworker, or when a colleague takes credit for initiating and carrying out a project on which you spent months. Or how about the time when you were privy to office gossip about a colleague that you knew had no truth to it. These rude, discourteous workplace behaviors are toxic to an organization's culture and can erode employees' performance.

Workplace incivility, according to Drs. Christine Porath and Christine Pearson, authors of the forthcoming book *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It*, is fast becoming a "silent" killer of office morale and workplace productivity, a reason behind job turnover, and a huge employer expense. Pearson defines workplace incivility as "low-intensity deviant behavior with vague intent to harm the target." While more serious forms of workplace deviance such as violence or aggression are generally directed at individual employees and organizations, acts of workplace incivility are directed toward individuals and include only minor forms of interpersonal deviance.

What's the consequence of workplace incivility on employee performance? To find out, Porath and Pearson surveyed several thousand managers and employees from a broad mix of U.S. businesses. Employees who were targets of rude and discourteous acts reported that these actions led to a reduction in work effort, work quality and overall employee performance. Four-fifths of respondents stated that they were preoccupied at work because of the incident, and an almost equal percentage said they were less committed to their employer because of it.

Another study of workplace incivility conducted by Pearson found similar results, plus more. In this study of 775 U.S. employees who had been targets of co-workers' or supervisors' lack of respect, nearly one half of participants considered changing jobs to avoid the instigator, and one in eight actually did leave their job to escape the untenable situation. Considering that employer turnover costs are typically estimated to be 1.5 to 2.5 times the salary paid for the job (or \$50,000 on average per departing employee across U.S. industries and occupational classifications), the financial impacts of incivility mount up fast.

Who is likely to be an instigator of bad behavior? According to the studies cited above, instigators of uncivil acts were twice as likely to be men and three times as likely to be of higher status than the target. In addition, men were seven times as likely to behave poorly toward someone of lower status as toward someone of higher status. Women, on the other hand, were equally likely to act uncivilly toward their supervisors as toward their subordinates, but less likely to act poorly toward their peers. And contrary to what you might think, Pearson's study found that instigators of bad behavior are generally excellent workers who have a distinct and valuable talent to the firm.

Experts on workplace incivility, such as Pearson and Porath, recommend curbing workplace incivility with three steps: containing it, correcting it and curtailing bad behaviors. Here are a few examples of strategies successfully used by companies to minimize incivility.

Set a zero-tolerance policy for uncivil acts. Expectations must start at the top and should be conveyed verbally as well as through an official workplace policy.

Reflect on your own interaction styles and behaviors. Once expectations have been set by senior leadership, it's important for managers and supervisors to self-examine their own communication and interaction style with

subordinates, supervisors and co-workers. Subordinates often model a superior's behavior. If supervisors and managers want their employees to refrain from bad behavior, they need to set an example. As Pearson found in one of her studies, one fourth of employees who have acted poorly toward others say that they did so because of their leader's rude behavior.

Avoid hiring instigators. Typically instigators leave a trail behind them. Check job candidates' references thoroughly, especially when considering hiring someone for a senior position. Similarly, experts recommend that reference checks should go beyond the list of contacts provided by the job candidate to include co-workers and other personal contacts at various levels of their current or last job.

Train employees to be civil. Because there are not the same legal implications for incivility as there are for workplace violence or sexual harassment, training for civility is less focused on clarifying laws and legal implications and is more of a skill-based training. Providing supervisors, managers and — in some cases — employees with the opportunity to develop skills such as conflict resolution, dealing with difficult people or stress management will help to curtail bad behavior. To further reiterate the concepts introduced in training, expectations about skill development should be a part of performance evaluations.

Seriously consider employee reports of incivility. Researchers contend that bad behavior thrives in work environments that ignore employees' input. To prevent this from happening, it is important that supervisors and managers carefully investigate employee incivility reports to determine the best course of action. If employees find that no one will consider, correct or contain the reported problem, they may learn that speaking up actually worsens the instigator's actions.

Workplace incivility often gets ignored because of its subtle and vague nature. Yet its repercussions to employees and organizations are costly and can reverberate, jeopardizing reputation, brand and customer loyalty.

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