IT'S NICE TO BE NICE

What is workplace incivility, why should we care, and what should we do?

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What is Incivility?

You find yourself walking into work with your supervisor, and you hold the door open for her. She breezes through without saying thank you. When you get to the break room to have your morning cup of coffee, you find that the pot is empty—the last person did not refill the coffeemaker. Later, your co-workers all leave for lunch together while you are in the washroom. To top off your day, you receive an email from a co-worker, demanding that you finish a project—in the next two hours!

All of these behaviours are examples of incivility, a low intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect and courtesy. The key component of this definition that separates incivility from other forms of interpersonal mistreatment is the concept of "ambiguous intent." In a typical case of interpersonal mistreatment (e.g., verbal aggression; emotional abuse; violence), there is a perpetrator (i.e., a person committing the misdeed) and a victim (i.e., a person who is on the receiving end of the misdeed). Using verbal aggression as an example, the perpetrator shouts at the victim. In this case,

intentionality is very clear—the perpetrator intends to psychologically harm the victim. However, in a case of incivility, this clear intentionality is no longer present. For example, an employee says "hello" to a co-worker, and the co-worker does not respond in kind. The employee might be considered a victim of the co-worker, who might be considered the perpetrator of incivility, though it is not clear that any harm was meant. Perhaps the co-worker did not hear the employee saying "hello," or perhaps it actually was an intentional slight. With incivility, the ambiguity of intent makes it difficult to tell.

At work, incivility can manifest in three major ways. First, incivility can be interpersonal in nature, where one person is directly uncivil toward another person.

In the above example, your supervisor neglecting to thank you for holding the door is an example of interpersonal incivility (whether or not she actually intended to be uncivil).

Alternately, incivility can manifest as "cyber incivility." Cyber incivility is uncivil behaviour exhibited in computer-mediated interactions, including emails, texts, and social media communications.

Examples of this behaviour would be sending time-sensitive information via email, sending blunt or terse emails, or not replying to emails sent by others.

Given the fast-paced, technology-focused nature of today's workplace, as well as the large-scale adoption of smart phones, cyber incivility is increasingly becoming an important concern.

The inherently impersonal nature of cyber communication can further exacerbate this issue. Finally, incivility can be "victimless," in that the rude behaviour does not immediately impact another person.

For example, not refilling the office coffee machine or printer, or tossing trash next to the trash can without picking it up are examples of victimless incivility. It does not have an immediate impact on another person, but it violates norms for courtesy, nonetheless.

LETS START THE NEW YEAR BEING CIVIL TO EACH OTHER

Why should we care?

Workplace incivility may be low in intensity, but it is quite high in frequency. Over the past ten years, research investigating workplace incivility has estimated that prevalence rates may be between 75% and 100%, meaning that nearly all employees have experienced some level of incivility from their co-workers', supervisors, or customers/clients .

The exceptionally high frequency of occurrence for incivility is cause for concern because research has consistently demonstrated that the effects of incivility can compound over time.

As a result, incivility has been shown to lead to a host of deleterious effects on employee and organizational well-being. In terms of personal outcomes, co-worker incivility has been linked to higher levels of employee burnout, feelings of strain, and decreased psychological well-being.

In terms of organizational outcomes, incivility has been related to employee withdrawal, decreased satisfaction, and decreased performance.

Not only is incivility related to these negative effects on employees and organizations, but it can also "spiral" out of control. That is, when someone perceives incivility from another individual in the workplace, they may retaliate with an uncivil act of their own (i.e., you were rude to me, I'm going to be rude to you!), creating a spiral of incivility.

In such a spiral, retaliation occurs between two organizational members, increasing in intensity and eventually escalating from minor deviant acts of incivility to overtly hostile acts such as verbal aggression and even violence. As such, minor breaches in etiquette could quickly grow out-of-hand.

What can we do?

It is clear that incivility—in its many forms—can be incredibly harmful to both individual employees and to their employing organizations.

What, then, should be done to reduce incivility? Research investigating civility interventions is relatively new, but there are some recommendations that might be effective in build-

ing a respectful work environment. Perhaps one of the most important factors in maintaining a civil work environment is to have a strong example set by management. That is, managers should model civil behaviour, helping create a culture of civility and respect. If managers frequently violate social norms for courtesy and respect, employees might take this as a cue that doing so is acceptable and begin to be uncivil to each other.

Managers should realize that they are always "on," and should be especially careful when interacting with employees, whether these interactions are in-person or via email. By setting the tone for the organization, managers can help create a culture of civility and respect at all levels of the organization.

Aside from managers modelling behaviour, organizations can also make sure that norms for courtesy and respect are evident to employees from the recruitment stage. Recruiters should have the "people skills" necessary to embody the civility norms of the organization and set the stage for these expectations. During the selection phase, employers can thoroughly check references for (among other things) indications of consistent past rude behaviour, as well as select on personality traits that might be related to civil, respectful behaviour (such as conscientiousness and agreeableness). Upon employees entering an organization, onboarding programs can make civility expectations clear, and issues related to interpersonal behaviour can be discussed. Emphasizing that employees should never be too busy to be nice should be a priority, and this should be reiterated throughout the course of an employee's career.

Overall, organizational leadership should take whatever steps they can to maintain a civil climate, keeping in mind that promoting civility can both reduce negative employee outcomes and increase organizational effectiveness. Maintaining a civil work environment is not necessarily easy, particularly due to the fast-paced, often interpersonally disconnected work environment, where communication is quick, and emails are maybe sent without a thought. However, previous research indicates that it can be done, and making efforts toward promoting civility will certainly pay off in the long-term.