

# THE HIDDEN TOLL OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

Research shows that hurtful workplace behavior can depress performance, increase employee turnover, and even mar customer relationships.

by Christine Porath

As the workplace becomes faster-paced, more technologically complex, and culturally diverse, civility matters. Among other things, it helps dampen potential tensions and furthers information sharing and team building.

Yet workplace incivility is rampant and on the rise. The accumulation of thoughtless actions that leave employees feeling disrespected—intentionally ignored, undermined by colleagues, or publicly belittled by an insensitive manager—can create lasting damage that should worry any organization. In research over the past 18 years, I have polled tens of thousands of workers worldwide about how they're treated at work. Nearly half of those surveyed in 1998 reported they were treated rudely at least once a month, a figure that rose to 55 percent in 2011 and 62 percent in 2016 (exhibit). There's no single reason for the trend. Workplace relationships may be fraying as fewer employees work in the office and feel more isolated and less respected. Some studies point to growing narcissism among younger workers.<sup>1</sup> Globalization may be causing cultural clashes that bubble beneath the surface. And in the digital age, messages are prone to communication gaps and

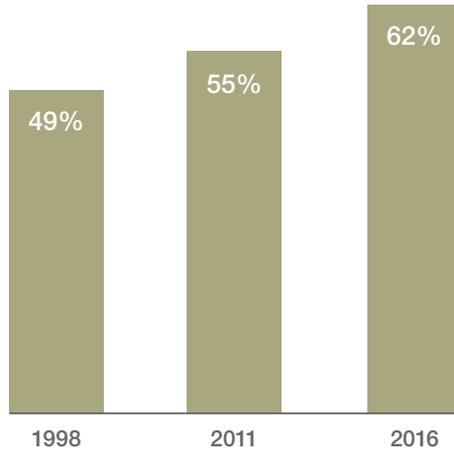
misunderstanding—and put-downs, unfortunately, are more easily delivered when not done face to face.

Whatever the underlying causes, the costs of incivility rise as employee stress levels increase. Among the problem areas are the following:

- *Workplace performance.* Nearly everybody who experiences workplace incivility somehow settles the score—with their offender and the organization. Of the nearly 800 managers and employees across 17 industries that I polled with Christine Pearson, a professor at the Thunderbird School of Global Management, those who didn't feel respected performed worse. Forty-seven percent of those who were treated poorly deliberately decreased their time spent at work, and 38 percent said they intentionally decreased the quality of their work. Not surprisingly, 66 percent admitted their performance declined, and 78 percent said their commitment to the organization had declined. Part of the performance penalty is related to how employees internalize stress levels. Eighty percent lost work time

Exhibit

The share of employees who report being treated rudely by colleagues at least once a month has risen by 13 percentage points since 1998.



Source: Christine Porath, *Cycle to civility*, Georgetown University working paper, 2016

worrying about the incident, and 63 percent lost work time in their effort to avoid the offender.

- *Employee turnover.* Many losses go undetected when employees leave the organization. Typically those who quit in response to an experience of bad behavior don't tell their employers why. Turnover costs add up quickly: an estimated twice an employee's annual salary in the case of high-level employees.<sup>2</sup> In our survey, of those treated poorly 12 percent said they had left their job because of the uncivil treatment.
- *Customer experience.* Incivility may take a toll on customer relationships. My research with Valerie Folkes and Debbie MacInnis at the University

of Southern California's Marshall School of Business shows that many consumers are less likely to buy anything from a company they perceive as uncivil, whether the rudeness is directed at them or other employees. Witnessing one quick negative interaction leads to generalizations about other employees, the organization, and even the brand. In my survey with Pearson, 25 percent of those experiencing uncivil behavior admitted to taking their frustrations out on customers.

- *Collaboration.* When people feel disrespected, it eats away at them—and their potential. Engagement, teamwork, knowledge sharing, innovation, and contributions wane

even among those who choose to work around the slights. In short, incivility kills helpfulness and collaboration. In experiments, I've found that when employees are exposed to rudeness, they are three times less likely to help others and their willingness to share drops by more than half. Civility, on the other hand, enhances individual contributions and team performance by increasing the feeling of "psychological safety." Team environments become trusting, respectful, and safe places to take risks. In one test, psychological safety increased by 35 percent when people were offered a suggestion civilly rather than uncivilly—for example, in an interaction marked by inconsiderate interruption.

To be sure, the magnitude of the costs and disruptions will depend upon the degree of incivility. Abusive behaviors, for example, will cause deeper damage to the organization than milder forms such as slights. Companies will need to adjust their remedies accordingly.

### **Some practical steps**

My research with Alexandra Gerbasi of the University of Surrey and Andrew Parker of the University of Kentucky<sup>3</sup> shows that de-energizing relationships—those that are negative or draining—have a four to seven times stronger negative impact on performance than the positive effects of relationships that are energizing (defined as leaving employees feeling enthused or upbeat). Where possible, weed out toxic people before they join

your organization. Interview for civility, using structured interviews with behavioral questions. Check references thoroughly, but also go beyond provided references, chasing down leads and hunches.

Make it clear to employees that they need to hold their managers and colleagues accountable for living up to your norms of civility. When asked why they were uncivil, more than 25 percent of those I surveyed blamed their organization for not providing them with the basic skills they needed. To teach employees these skills, you might offer training on giving and receiving feedback (positive and corrective), working across cultural differences, and dealing with difficult people. Coaching on negotiation, stress management, crucial conversations, and mindfulness can help as well. Develop a set of civility metrics to assure that change is sustained.

Leadership is crucial. In my research, the number-one attribute that garnered commitment and engagement from employees was respect from their leaders. In fact, no other leadership behavior had a bigger effect on employees across the outcomes measured. Being treated with respect was more important to employees than recognition and appreciation, communicating an inspiring vision, providing useful feedback, or even providing opportunities for learning, growth, and development.

The research found that those getting respect from their leaders reported much higher levels of health and well-being; derived greater enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning from their jobs; and had

better focus and a greater ability to prioritize. Those feeling respected were also much more likely to engage with work tasks and more likely to stay with their organizations.

While these interventions and changes in leadership mind-sets can help rebalance an already uncivil environment, it's also important to note that promoting organizational health more broadly may be the best way to keep the early shoots of incivility from taking hold. Organizations that neglect values, role model inappropriate behavior, fail to instill meaning at work, or don't take collaboration seriously will be fertile soil for problem behavior. When organizations address these issues systematically, more civility will follow.

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A final thought: in a period of continuous corporate change, injecting more civility can help companies navigate the uncertainty and volatility. My research suggests that employees who feel that they're being treated respectfully are also much more motivated to embrace and drive change. 

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Zaslow, "The most-praised generation goes to work," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2007, wsj.com (subscription required).

<sup>2</sup> See John Boudreau and Wayne Cascio, *Investing in People: Financial Impact of Human Resources Initiatives*, Indianapolis: FT Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Parker, Alexandra Gerbasi, Christine L. Porath, "The effects of de-energizing ties in organizations and how to manage them," *Organizational Dynamics*, 2013, Volume 42, pp. 110–18.

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