

CONFLICT

Make Civility the Norm on Your Team

by Christine Porath

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JAKOB OWENS/UNSPLASH

We all want to come to work and be treated with kindness and respect. Unfortunately, my research shows that there is rampant incivility in most organizations. I found that 98% of the workers I surveyed over the past 20 years have experienced rude behavior and 99% have witnessed it. And the situation seems to be worsening. In 2011 half said they were treated badly at least once a week – up from a quarter in 1998. So what can a manager do to ensure that people on their team or in their department treat each other well?

Articulate values and set expectations. First, managers need to set expectations. This starts in the interview process when you have the opportunity to articulate your values to prospects during the hiring process. Be explicit about your organization’s values and then encourage candidates to decide for themselves: Do they truly want to work in an organization where these values reign supreme every day?

Once an employee joins your team, it’s important to reinforce those values. Marriott, for example, identified three pillars of employee well-being: “We all need to feel good about ourselves, the workplace, and about our company’s role in society.” Managers at Marriott know that small daily acts affect how employees interact with others and that civility spreads in networks. Saying good morning when someone enters the elevator rather than staring at the floor in silence can make a difference. At Marriott, the expectation is that everyone contribute to creating a positive community in the workplace. This message is reinforced in meetings, at events, and with various awards for contributing to the culture.

Define civility. When establishing specific principles you want employees to follow in how they treat others, I’ve found that it’s beneficial to engage them in an ongoing conversation about what civility means. These discussions garner more support and empower employees to hold one another accountable for civil behavior.

In the Irvine, California office of law firm Bryan Cave, managing partner Stuart Price and I led employees through an exercise to define collective norms. We asked participants: “Who do you want to be?” And then we asked them what norms were right for their organization. They named rules for which they were willing to hold one another accountable and in just over an hour, employees generated and agreed upon ten norms. The firm bound these into a “civility code,” which they prominently display in their lobby. According to Price, this code was directly responsible for the firm being ranked number one on Orange County’s Best Places to Work list.

Bryan Cave’s Code of Civility

1. We greet and acknowledge each other.

2. We say please and thank you.

3. We treat each other equally and with respect, no matter the conditions.

4. We acknowledge the impact of our behavior on others.

5. We welcome feedback from each other.

6. We are approachable.

7. We are direct, sensitive, and honest.

8. We acknowledge the contributions of others.

9. We respect each other's time commitments.

10. We address incivility.

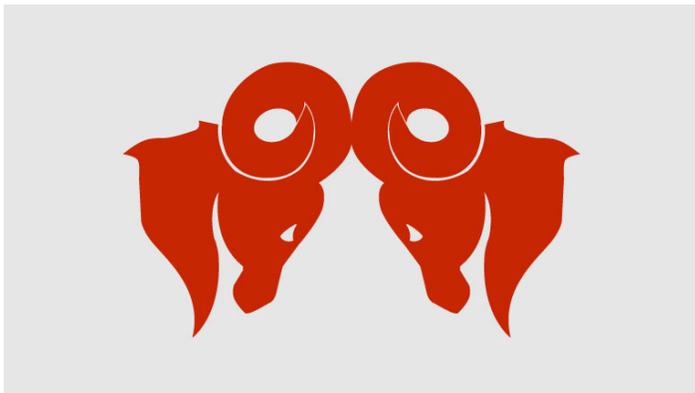
Give employees skills. It's not enough to define norms. You also have to train employees to understand and respect them. When Christine Pearson and I asked people in one survey why they were uncivil, more than 25% blamed their organization for not providing them with the basic skills they needed, such as listening and giving feedback. If your employees aren't behaving well, and you've already gone through the trouble of hammering home the organization's civility message, ask yourself, "Have I also equipped them to succeed?" Don't assume everyone instinctively knows how to be civil; many people never learned the basic skills.

To teach employees these skills, you need to give explicit training that covers what civility looks like, describes situations in which employees sometimes act uncivilly, provides tips on how to maintain composure, and affords opportunities to practice behaving civilly in emotionally charged situations.

Some leading-edge companies are already offering formal civility training. The National Security Agency had an annual civility campaign in which organization promotes treating everyone with respect and dignity. Microsoft's popular Precision Questioning class teaches participants to question their own ideas, develop approaches to healthy, constructive criticism, and act with emotional agility even in tense situations.

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Conflict



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At a hospital in Los Angeles, temperamental doctors are required to attend what the hospital dubbed "charm school" to decrease their brashness and reduce the potential for lawsuits. The "charm school" teaches doctors that they must set the tone for their medical residents. This hospital also trains its employees to watch out for unreported instances of incivility, such as staff members refusing to work with particular doctors, complaints about nurses circulating through the grapevine, and residents seeming to steer clear of certain "mentors." Leaders at the hospital realized that nurses, staff, and residents often failed to report bad behavior formally. They

kept their complaints to themselves until they were pushed too far and felt compelled to file a lawsuit. Since doctors were the ones dealing with

these folks on a daily basis (and HR was relatively removed from the situation), doctors needed to stay alert to the warning signs. At this hospital, doctors are both mandated empowered and required to report all incidents. If they neglected this responsibility, and do not report all incidents of incivility the hospital held them personally responsible for the consequences.

Coach employees for civility. When coaching employees, focus on helping them learn to listen fully, give and receive feedback, work across differences, and deal with difficult people. You might also coach them on negotiation, stress management, crucial conversations, and mindfulness. Don't just impart information. A coach who reviews fundamental concepts and expectations must also be ready to hold employees accountable. Some Chick-fil-A franchise operators evaluate team members weekly using red, yellow, and green lights. The idea is to quickly catch and correct incivil behavior. At Zingerman's, a gourmet food business group based in Michigan, teams hold huddles to review how they're doing and make adjustments. One of the metrics they follow is how long it takes to properly greet customers.

One of the most crucial things for a manager to do, of course is to model the right behavior. You set the tone. Even if you establish expectations, define what civility means on your team, give people training and coaching, you can't expect employees to treat one another with respect, if you don't.



Christine Porath is a professor of management at Georgetown University and the author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*.

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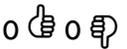
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KAREN TIDBALL CONSULTING 7 months ago

Great article and though provoking. Where do we as humans learn to be civil? For most, the learning comes within the family then is built upon via school, work, society; or not. Each of us have so many opportunities to help stop the drift of incivility. This article serves as a reminder for all of us to be observant of where we are less than civil and speak up when we observe it in others. One person and one action at a time makes progress possible.

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