

# THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CIVILITY AS A WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING COMPETENCY

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the importance of teaching civility as a workplace relationship building competency. First, civility is defined and described as it pertains to workplace culture. Then organizational examples are provided to demonstrate why companies care about civility. Next, we ponder civility as a relationship building competency that is important for work-related relationships. Continuing our investigation, we list some of the indirect costs of incivility and bullying (both are antitheses of civility) to stakeholders in the workplace. We consider through organizational examples what a civil workplace is like and we survey ways of teaching civility in the Business school (B-School) classroom, either face to face or online as these are the platforms through which we teach, learn, and work.*

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of appropriate civil behavior is not a new concept and has been recognized throughout the ages as a necessity to maintain order. The need to address civil and uncivil behaviors dates back to early times as civil behaviors are referenced texts as ancient as the Bible, “my dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...” (James 1:19, NIV), works of Plato (n.d), “False words are not only evil themselves, they infect the soul with evil. Good actions give strength to ourselves and inspire the actions of others” and in a host of other literature. It is no secret that the definition and perception of civility has varied through the ages and continuing because of culture, generational discernment, individual upbringing, and other variables that shape human sensitivities. This paper will explore why teaching civility is important to organizations. Although the focus of the paper is on civility as a workplace relationship building competency, arguably, civility adds value in families, friendship, community, and society as a whole.

## BACKGROUND: CIVILITY DEFINED AND DESCRIBED IN WORKPLACE CULTURE

Acceptable levels of civility do differ from one generation and/or culture to the next and civility appears in various forms. For example, what is civil in one society at one time may be perceived as impoliteness or incivility, depending on changing norms, folkways, mores, and traditions. This is not only evident in nations, families, and other groups, it is evident in organizational culture and society as well (see Cisco Systems, 2018; Clark, 2016; Inc, 2013; Pearson & Porath, 2009; Starbucks, 2016). Consistently, what is now perceived as uncivil behavior might have once been the standard for civility during certain time periods and cultures, while emotional and language behaviors might be the dynamic of uncivil behavior during another. As we are currently experiencing, the acceptability of behavior that might have been appropriate during the time of an action might be misconstrued through cultural restructuring and generational changes; the same behaviors that might have once been considered acceptable (e.g., touching the hand of someone who is suffering) might now come under scrutiny and be deemed inappropriate. Civility as a concept continues, and should, to be addressed according to time, culture and situations with due respect given to the standards of previous acceptability. That dynamic can often be challenging as it requires a change of mindset to function outside of familiarized principles.

For purposes of this paper, civility is defined as “claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process” (Muttke, 2017). In workplace culture, which is defined as any company or other organizational culture wherein language, history, and behavior are foundational to the culture and norms, folkways, mores, and traditions act as boundaries for the way people treat one another, civility is a valuable competency. This means that civility is a competency, “a specific personal characteristic which contributes to effective and/or superior performance” such as motivation, self-knowledge, willingness to perform and other measurable, observable abilities that can be developed in individuals and teams (Management Study Guide, 2018).

## WHY IS CIVILITY IMPORTANT IN THE WORKPLACE?

To paraphrase Mark Twain, 'kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see' (Brainy Quote, 2018). It can easily be perceived as one of the outcomes of civility in the workplace. Muttke (2017) asserts that civility is not just being polite, it is an ability to disagree without being disrespectful. It is a means of establishing common ground on which dialogue and/or difficult conversations can be discoursed without wearing one's feelings or preconceptions on one's sleeve or, perhaps worse yet, in the forefront of one's mind at all times. Civility is about being able to be present for meaningful conversations – even with those that we might have disagreements and/or longstanding diverse perspectives of important issues. In essence, civility is a position from which we can solve problems and discuss ideas that are bigger than the objectives of any one individual or team. Its importance can be recognized in any situation, including, but not limited to customer service, teambuilding, innovation, problem solving, and the building/maintenance of strategic alliances based on trust and healthy relationships.

Moving forward, the language of civility will continue to morph as society changes. The days of please and thank-you and yes sir and yes ma'am have taken a hit as is evidenced by the proposed Alexa software update giving parents the option for Alexa to thank children for asking nicely or saying please when making a command. Alexa will respond with the appropriate 'thank you' for civil behavior. One must wonder if there will be an option for Alexa to respond with 'you did not say please' or 'what do you say?' if the behavior is not so civil. (Gonzalez, 2018). However, the Alexa illustration is just about politeness as Alexa does not openly disagree with the orders she is being given. Technologies such as this only do our bidding; they never teach us how to respectfully disagree with one another or to problem solve when the relationship costs are high.

## GENERATIONAL IMPACT ON CIVILITY

Generational cultures, values and perceptions are important considerations when looking at interactions within the workplace. There are five distinct generational categories currently in the workplace at varying levels of participation. The GI & silent generation (1901 – 1942) 2%, baby boomers (1942 – 1960) 25%, generation X (1961 – 1980) 33%, millennials (1980 – 2002) 35%, and the incoming generation z (2002 – 2025) 5% (Fry, 2018), have cause to interact daily. Each generation has a defined set of standards related to authority, leadership, relationships, likes and dislikes, and acceptability's.

The characteristic language and values of each generations is distinctive and tone setting. Wroblewski (2015) shares the work of Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, describing generational attributes for each cohort. The silent generation is considered practical, hierarchical, dedicated, respectful, maintains a strong belief in law and order, and holds honor as a high standard. The boomers moved a bit out of the previous generations standards with an optimistic outlook, more focus on personal gratification and growth, a love/hate relationship with authority given the outcomes of their parent's loyalty, and were growing the consensus approach with a team process. Gen X on the other hand takes a giant leap to new and different perspectives. Much of the change relates to the influence of technology and the new process of thinking globally. They appreciate diversity and balance. This generation is geared toward fun and informality. If reviewed closely, one can see how the boomers value and culture changes facilitated the Gen X mindset.

The millennial is hopeful and determined, they recognize diversity and morality, and they strive for achievement collaboratively. Millennials have a unique background which contributes to their mindset. The millennial group is currently in the 22 to 37-year age range and prime to be in critical management positions beginning in the year 2020. This particular group had a rocky career start in that the economy was in a recession and the boomers were lingering in positions that prevented the millennial from entering into career developing roles (Jong, 2018). They completed a degree and were prepared to go to work yet fell into a 40% under and unemployment hole causing an animosity toward education and the workplace. Do these conditions have a particular relationship to civility? Perhaps not; however, the experiences shape relationships and values which have an impact on behavior and perceived intent and trust.

The newest generational cohort to enter the workforce are post millennial and titled Generation Z. This generation brings a different set of perspectives that are shaped by their current life experiences, their fascination with technologies, and being products of the Great Recession are motivated by security. Patel (2017), shares key concepts that will potentially describe GenZ in the workplace. He sees them being more competitive and independent, entrepreneurial, with a desire to be catered to. Because they are true digital natives they are able to multi-task to a higher level than millennials; however, they have a strong need for personal face-to-face communication versus the quick message or e-mail interaction. It will be interesting to see how this new generation shapes civil behaviors and acceptability's.

## WHO SAYS CIVILITY IS IMPORTANT AND WHY DO THEY CARE?

Dr. Larry Schaefer (2015) in his research on the history of civility states:

Civility is one our most honored and valued words, a five-star word. It has been sculptured and polished over time. It is nuanced; it has depth. It has linguistic layers of meaning. It walks in partnership with other honored words such as politeness, duty and civilized. There are those who say that duty and civilized should be expressed together; the duty of civility (p 103).

In recent years, some powerful and well respected business leaders have recognized the importance of civility in their companies and they have perceived themselves in positions through which they could make a difference. Why did they care about whether their companies employed civil individuals? The reasons are many, as have been alluded to in the previous section. If employees are not civil to customers, businesses lose market share. If they cannot work well together, the organizational culture

becomes toxic, myopic, and the company develops blind spots where problems grow, rather than explored as opportunities for growth. Requiring your employees to "be nice" may seem a little like babysitting or playing Big Brother. In an ideal world, you're hiring people who don't need to be reminded how to be polite. But given how ubiquitous rudeness appears to have become--and the devastating effects it can have on your talent pool--these kinds of policies may be a smart move (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

## **OCHSNER HEALTH SYSTEMS**

Ochsner Health Systems has implemented two means of improving bad manners in the workplace. For starters, Ochsner instituted what it calls a 10/5 rule: Employees are expected to make eye contact with anybody who comes within 10 feet of them, and greet anybody who's standing within five (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Consultant firm, YourBrandVoice (2018), helps companies develop civility through social media. Their take on this practice is that in addition to offering employees opportunities to engage in exceptional customer service, it can also diminish false chatter, or conversations designed to make others think employees are busy working when they are not. Second, Ochsner has a no-venting policy. Frustrated employees must go to designated 'safe zones' where they can vent when frustrated, such as in a private office. Adherence to this policy factors into employee evaluations (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

## **CISCO SYSTEMS**

Another organization that is taking civility seriously is the Cisco Corporation. Cisco developed a comprehensive plan to assure respectful employee interactions after studying the cost of incivility among non-Cisco employees. Among other factors, Cisco calculated lost work time worrying about an uncivil event and trying to avoid the offender; intentional reduction of work effort; weakened organizational commitment; and reduced time spent at work. Cisco considers itself an extremely civil organization, presuming only one percent of their population would encounter a workplace incivility per year. The company still found tremendous gains in their civility focus (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

The Cisco plan for civility is found in the Corporate Social Responsibility document (<https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/about/csr/impact/our-people.html>). The concepts for Cisco are simply expressed in the statement of "putting people first." The concept is expanded in the value proposition:

Our standing as a global technology leader reflects the passion and commitment of our people. We strive to create a workplace where people can continually grow and explore, and where employees can realize more fulfilling and productive careers. This drives Cisco's strong performance and allows our people to help change the world for the better.

The ideals of civility are actually standards of behavior to not only create an enjoyable, healthy environment for employment but are also expectations of interaction within the broader scope of society. "The practice of civility holds us to our human heartedness, the essence of our humanity. It meant humans acting their best, their most noble selves, acting civilized" (Schaefer, 2015).

## **MICROSOFT**

The Microsoft Corporation began in earnest to address the issues of civility in 2003 (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Certainly, some of the motivation was the result of negative feedback on customer service surveys and corporate culture evaluations. As a result, Microsoft developed key values of personal attitude and behavior that were intended to transform the corporate environment and public reputation. Pearson and Porath (2009) list the values as:

- Listen to understand others w/o interrupting
- Communicate critical feedback respectfully
- Consider others' knowledge & experience
- Don't disparage others
- Assume the best motives in others
- Ask difficult questions to discover answers, never to demean
- Never act in ways that can be perceived as threatening, intolerant, discriminatory
- Demonstrate more interest in finding the right answer than in being right
- Maintain objectivity when conflict occurs (Pearson & Porath, 2009, p. 131)

The guidelines are designed to change the mental models of employees and leadership that will in turn change the quality of the interaction within the organization and with customers in the marketplace.

Microsoft has taken the civility emphasis into the internet communication as well. According to Jacqueline Beauchere, Microsoft Chief Online Safety Officer (February 6, 2018), standards of behavior for online interaction need to be developed. The Internet has certainly created significant opportunity for learning and communication but it has also created a safe haven for individuals to interact in a rude, unprofessional and uncivil manner. The Microsoft Blog delineates the four standards of online behavior expected in the Microsoft world. Microsoft has taken the civility campaign to the wider marketplace through the Digital Civility Challenge. The key principles of the Challenge are:

1. Live the Golden Rule by acting with empathy, compassion and kindness in every interaction and treating everyone you

- connect with online with dignity and respect.
2. Respect differences, honor diverse perspective and when disagreements surface, engage thoughtfully, and avoid name-calling and personal attacks.
3. Pause before replying to things you disagree with, and don't post or send anything that could hurt someone else, damage reputations or threaten someone's safety.
4. Stand up for yourself and others by supporting those who are targets of online abuse or cruelty, reporting threatening activity and preserving evidence of inappropriate or unsafe behavior (Beauchere, February 6, 2018).

## **O'MELVENY AND MEYERS**

O'Melveny and Meyers is a California based law firm that has been in operation for over 130 years. The firm has grown from two lawyers representing ranch hands in one location in Los Angeles to about 800 attorneys in 15 offices on 3 continents practicing, among other things, international law. The core values of the firm are "uncompromising excellence, distinctive leadership, and superior citizenship" (Vault, 2018). According to Pearson & Porath (2009), leaders in this firm realized that law firms are uniquely positioned to be examples of civility in society. Notably, the firm has been honored for its corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, and community engagement on a variety of occasions. Their website states, "It's more than what you do: it's how you do it" (Jacobsen, 2018), and their track record and reputation are evidence of the success of the strategy.

## **STARBUCKS**

Starbucks' CEO Howard Schultz referred to "the American Dream as a 'reservoir' that is replenished with the values, work ethic and integrity of the American people" and he expressed concern that, "our reservoir is running dry, depleted by cynicism, despair, division, exclusion, fear and indifference." (Starbucks Newsroom, 2016).

In 2014, Schultz challenged shareholders to think about the role and responsibility of a for-profit company, but in the two years since, "dysfunction and polarization have worsened," he said (Starbucks Newsroom, 2016). Schultz suggested citizens fill the reservoir of the American Dream back up, "not with cynicism, but with optimism. Not with despair, but with possibility. Not with division, but with unity. Not with exclusion, but with inclusion. Not with fear, but with compassion. Not with indifference, but with love." (Starbucks Newsroom, 2016). In an effort to encourage personal, as well as organizational (including societal) levels, Schultz reminded people, "It's not about the choice we make every four years" ... "This is about the choices we are making every day." (Starbucks Newsroom, 2016). While one may agree or disagree that public and business discourse have grown louder, Schultz point about personal accountability is certainly well taken. Civility begins with the individual and it moves out as the concentric circles that occur when a pebble is thrown into a pond.

## **US DEPT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Although it cannot be described as a company, perhaps one of the most notable organizations that has focused on the value of civility as a workplace competency in the past few years is the United States Dept. of Veterans Affairs. Working closely with the National Center for Organizational Development (NCOD), the VA has been exploring the value added through employee training, organizational development, and the use of psychometric instruments, such as those that examine teamwork, servant leadership, and change management phases, to name a few (U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2018). In fact, in an effort to engage in scholarly discussion and to enhance the shared body of knowledge pertaining to civility, the V.A. has participated in ongoing research pertaining to what they define as the CREW (civility, respect, engagement in the workplace) model they have been developing (Leiter, 2012; 2013).

## **INCIVILITY (OR THE ABSENCE OF CIVILITY)**

Before incivility can be conquered, incivility must be defined and understood. According to Pearson and Porath (2009), incivility can be defined as, "the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct." (Pearson & Porath, 2009, p. 12). When first looking at the definition of incivility, it appears to be a series of bad behaviors. But, diving a bit deeper into the concept of "conventional norms of workplace conduct", one must wonder what those conventional norms look like in our spiraling asynchronous virtual workplace and how they apply to uncivil behaviors.

According to Andersson and Pearson (1999), the informal aggressiveness of society is dramatically changing the cultures of the workplace. That reflection was observed in 1999, how much more dramatic has that aggressive social behavior and definition of right and wrong become during the past 19 years? The workplace is the last bastion of civility with expectations and accountabilities in place. However, personal and community behaviors and acceptability's have literally spilled over into the workplace and the workplace is relenting to societal boundary and communication changes making for an uncomfortable and troubled atmosphere.

Given that casual and often disrespectful language and tone observed in community is considered a norm and often a right, would that spillover of behaviors violate the so called conventional norms of workplace conduct? Incivility runs rampant within political arenas as an acceptable form of communication. That wrongful behavior is encouraged and continues on by the uninformed with inappropriate language and debate on social media platforms. The behaviors of incivility include passing blame, belittling other's efforts, being disinterested, taking credit for others work, nonverbal gestures, and an ever-growing behavior of being technologically disrespectful. However, according to Clark (2016), incivility also includes the failure to take action, support, report, speak up and assist and is equally offensive as it condones and sanctions wrongful behaviors.

## **INCIVILITY – HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?**

Experiencing incivility sometimes causes the individual to question their own discernment of the behaviors wondering if it is me or them and is this abnormal behavior really happening. There are times that the behavior is culturally established and hidden in the halls of the organization. After landing the perfect position, the newcomer is gradually exposed to a variety of expected wrongful norms that are not always blatantly visible externally. It appears in leadership abuse, or peer to peer mistreatment and disrespect, which trickles down to all levels within the organization. This uncivil behavior is damaging and contagious given enough time. This wrongful behavior is an interesting concept and often difficult to detect until it becomes precedence and set in stone. This behavior drags down the organization and takes its toll on employees and the community (Porath, 2016).

There are other times when the behavior infiltrates a healthy organization through the integration of small wrongful behaviors. This infiltration comes from a variety of sources including new administration with the new boss bring his cohort with him to make changes, whatever it takes. It might be one person entering the workplace dynamic that stimulates the behavior through coerced peer pressure to conform. Or, Clark (2016), emphasizes the importance of acknowledging wrongful behaviors and not falling into the trap of allowing avoidance to establish precedence. Repeated avoidance declares the behavior as acceptable. At that point, it is a like it or leave it option with little or no recourse to the behaviors. However, as the cultural behavior develops within the organization, it is damaging and dangerous. Dangerous as it can lead to stronger wrongful behaviors with the culture of the organization becoming the biggest liability.

## **WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF INCIVILITY?**

According to Pearson and Porath (2009), incivility has both tangible and intangible costs. These include:

- 80% of employees and other people in the U.S believe incivility is a problem
- 96% of U.S. workers perceive that they have experienced incivility at work
- 60% of U.S. workers perceive that they have experienced stress due to incivility at work
- 80% of U.S. workers think they get no respect at work
- 48% of U.S. workers think they are treated uncivilly at work at least once a year
- 75% (3 of 4) employees were dissatisfied with the way their employers respond to incivility
- Over half of U.S employees said that, if they reported incivility, they would have career problems at work
- This means many people do not think civility is widely practiced in their workplace.
- This behavior is not unique to the U.S. workplace. It occurs in other nations as well. (Pearson & Porath, 2009)

How might these costs be calculated in terms of lost opportunity, destruction of employee morale, and diminished employee motivation? It is likely we will never know. In essence, many of these employees stay, rather than leave (another obvious cost of incivility is the loss of good employees), which also involves ongoing costs to both the individual and the organization..

## **HOW CAN BUSINESS SCHOOLS TEACH CIVILITY? CAN WE? SHOULD WE?**

Muttke (2017) reminds us that civility is learned behavior – regardless of the culture or generational cohort. When teaching and learning civility, the following behaviors, not in any particular order (rather, simultaneously and continuously) should be modeled:

- Praise and empower others – teach people that what they do right is laudable when they do it (or as soon as possible thereafter).
- Think before speaking and say what you mean without being mean.
- When challenging someone’s view, don’t attack the individual, respond to the idea.
- Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- When wrong, apologize – regardless of whether you are the leader/follower, manager, or other employee.
- Demonstrate and teach empathy and respect in your interactions with others.
- Be respectful of individual differences – this should be applied to ALL individuals.
- Be aware of the differences between judgement and comparison.
- When disagreeing with someone, engage in civil discourse, intelligence, and humor.
- When someone’s attitude or position changes your emotions, consider why; don’t just simply react from the emotions

rising within you.

- Don't let anger or other emotions prevent you from hearing what others have to say.

The above guidelines might be considered as rules for classroom engagement, as well as guidelines for other conversational arenas. Just as we all remember that wonderful professor from our years of matriculating in higher education, we also remember the managers and leaders who helped to shape us and build our competencies in the workplace – whether academe or business.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge is to move toward a congruent civil organizational structure and striving to maintain that structure as an organizational value. Edmonds (2017) encourages four basic steps to cultivate workplace civility. The first step involves setting a new standard of value. The group must value civility and when that becomes a shared process, occasional acts of incivility can be absorbed by the overall healthy behaviors of the organization. The second step is vital to the process and that is modeling the behavior. All levels of the organization must be moving to the same standard or the process is useless. Once the standard is set, the third step is to coach the standard. Provide the expectation and connect through communication to establish the behavior. And finally, step four is to embed accountability to the standard. Are expected behaviors rewarded and shared? Are wrongful behaviors addressed? Do organizational policies reinforce positive and civil behaviors? Answering the questions and using the four steps will eliminate rude and uncivil behaviors and help grow and celebrate civil relationships.

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