

Anthony is rude to Charlotte...again. Why should you care?

Kimberly M. Greene

What would you do if you observed a rude interaction between two coworkers? Between a coworker and your supervisor? Would you think it was wrong? Would you intervene? Over the last fifteen years, several studies have shown the harmful impact that lack of civility has on individuals and the organization. Incivility negatively impacts organizational net earnings, turnover, customer relations, quality of work, and team morale (Porath & Pearson, 2013; Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 467). Individually, targets and observers experience reduced motivation, creativity, performance, helping behaviors, and organizational loyalty (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Pearson & Porath, 2005). Ultimately, violations of workplace civility norms may lead to increasingly aggressive acts from the target and observer (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Porath & Erez, 2009).

Decreased Organizational Outcomes. Still, some might wonder whether it matters if coworkers or supervisors display a lack of regard for others. Perhaps a bit of tension is good for keeping people on their toes? Research provides strong evidence that civility in the workplace matters. Even a single instance of incivility is likely to impact organizational functioning and climate (Porath & Erez, 2009). A recent survey of HR professionals showed that 13% of a manager's time is spent restoring relationships and troubleshooting harmful outcomes of incivility (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

Uncivil environments influence customer responses as well. Research has shown that 80% of people are less likely to conduct business with

a company if they perceive an employee as rude to their colleagues (Porath & Pearson, 2013, p.117). Notably, even when "occurrences are rare and followed by apologies, rationalizations, or efforts to make amends (Pearson & Porath, 2005, p.10)," incivility still has negative effects on the organization. Moreover, the tangible effects of incivility are seen in the corrosion of organizational culture, frayed workplace relationships, and diminished organizational outcomes (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson & Porath, 2005, p.8).

Was That Incivility? With 98% of workers experiencing uncivil behavior and 50% of individuals being treated rudely at least once a week (Porath & Pearson, 2013), it is vital for employees, managers, and organizations to understand what qualifies as incivility. In 1999, Andersson and Pearson first introduced incivility as "acting with disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for respect" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p.455). Though workplace respect norms vary throughout countries, industries, and organizations, the value respect brings to an organization is fundamental. There is an understanding that decency and ethical practices allow for cooperation amongst a team. When workplace incivility violates those mutual respect norms, the organization and employees suffer (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Examples of workplace incivility include rude and discourteous behaviors, such as pounding one's fist, swearing, or personally debasing, interrupting, and insulting the ideas of another (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Chui & Dietz, 2014; Reich & Hershcovis, 2014, p.3).

How Incivility Hurts the Target. For males and females alike, an unpleasant work environment negatively impacts the target of the uncivil acts. Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez (2014) reviewed the literature on incivility and found that prior research supported effective outcomes for targets of incivility include exhaustion, depression, lower levels of energy, lower affective trust, increased anger, fear, sadness, reduced optimism, and increased levels of stress. The literature review also showed that workplace incivility disturbs targets' personal lives, including decreased levels of well-being, marital satisfaction, and increased levels of work-family conflict (Schilpzand et al., 2014).

Furthermore, research has also revealed that violations of workplace civility norms lead to increasingly aggressive acts (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Anderson and Pearson (1995) described the spiral consequences of workplace incivility, noting that after an instance of incivility, the probable result would be a reciprocal counter-incivility from the target. In turn, increasingly strong responses may then escalate to more harmful aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Negative Impact on Observers. It is important to note that targets are not the only individuals affected by incivility. Observers' emotions and attitudes are also influenced by lack of civility between aggressors and targets (Reich & Hershcovis, 2014). A 2014 study by Reich and Hershcovis noted that observers treated instigators differently, based on their rude behavior. Observers were shown at times to punish an aggressor in work related ways, such as allocating them undesirable work. Aggressors also received less favorable evaluation of their

work performance, when rated by observers (Reich & Hershcovis, 2014). Additionally, Anderson and Pearson's research found that observers might replicate incivility behaviors with their own employees, colleagues, or customers (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 468).

Steps to a Civil Workplace. So, what can an organization do to prevent or correct workplace incivility? Andersson and Pearson suggested the following classic strategies that managers may use to create a civil workplace.

1. Managers should reflect on their behavior, noting any ways in which they may be contributing to a discourteous work environment. Managers may ask employees for feedback regarding their leadership style. What do employees like or dislike? Adjust any behaviors negatively impacting the civility of the office.
2. Focus on hiring team members who give the impression they will positively regard others and act politely.
 - a. Utilize multiple interview rounds when recruiting new team members. Include interviewers from varied departments and levels, noting feedback when making hiring decisions.
 - b. Use internship programs to learn about candidates' interpersonal tendencies. Evaluate if they fit well with company norms.
 - c. Conduct thorough reference checks on candidates, and request references for positions held prior to the most recent ones.
3. Provide opportunities for healthy stress release, including fitness centers, conflict mediators, and human resource hot lines (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Additional strategies have been suggested in recent research as well:

4. Set clear policies on civil workplace behavior, consistently addressing violations. Act quickly, holding all levels of employees to the same expectations (Reich & Hershcovis, 2014; Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

5. Conduct trainings on the importance of interventions against incivility. Include content on the unethical nature of deviant behavior and organizational policies to prevent retaliation against intervention (Chui & Dietz, 2014).

With the increased awareness of research findings concerning incivility, would you respond differently to the questions initially posed? What step will you take today to create a more civil workplace in your organization? It is the author's hope that more of us will make a conscious effort to implement key changes in the workplace, to prevent or remedy incivility. And, if necessary, intervene when witnessing a hurtful workplace interaction.

References

- Andersson, L. M., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? the spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24(3), 452-471. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/210962800?accountid=253599>
- Chui, C. W., & Dietz, J. (2014). Observing workplace incivility towards women: The roles of target reactions, actor motives, and actor-target relationships. *Sex Roles*, 71, 95-108. Retrieved from

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-014-0367-7>

- Pearson, C. M., & Porath, C. L. (2005). On the nature, consequences and remedies of workplace incivility: No time for "nice"? Think again. *Academy Of Management Executive*, 19(1), 7-18.
- Porath, C., & Pearson, C. (2013). The price of incivility. *Harvard Business Review*, 91(1-2), 115-121.
- Reich, T. C., & Hershcovis, M. S. (2014). Observing workplace incivility. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advance online publication.
- Schilpzand P., De Pater I. E. & Erez A. (2014). Workplace incivility: A review of the literature and agenda for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1-32.
- Umphress, E. E., Simmons, A. L., Folger, R., Ren, R. and Bobocel, R. (2013). Observer reactions to interpersonal injustice: The roles of perpetrator intent and victim perception. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

About the Author

Kimberly M. Greene is a student at Vanguard University of Southern California Master of Science Program in Organizational Psychology.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kimberly M. Greene at kimberly.greene@vanguard.edu.

Article DOI: 10.19099/fstp.081402