



## ***DEALING WITH INCIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE***

“Civility” is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as “politeness and courtesy”. While a simple definition, its meaning serves a very important role in everyday interaction among persons in society in general, and specifically in our culture, organizations and workplaces.

As far back as the 1990s, experts have agreed that North American organizations have had an emerging crisis on their hands — one of etiquette.<sup>1</sup> In a 2004 *Macleans magazine* article, Charlie Gillis referred to the “epidemic of incivility” in today’s society.<sup>2</sup> While incidents of incivility in the workplace may not generally be of sufficient concern to warrant a lot of attention by organizations, such incidents if reoccurring may eventually lead to worst case scenarios involving harassment, bullying or even violence in the workplace. Certainly, it would appear that cases of incivility are on the upswing, having been increasingly observed and reported.

*...According to surveys taken in the U.S., fully eight out of 10 Americans consider incivility to be a serious problem, while 61 percent think it has worsened in recent years. Canadian data is sparser, but one poll conducted in 1999 indicated 65 percent of us expected public manners to deteriorate over the next decade, even as other key quality-of-life indicators were on the upswing.*<sup>3</sup>

Observed examples of common uncivil behaviour are:

- ☞ Racial, sexual, religious, age, disability and ethnic jokes, comments and banter — spoken, e-mailed or however communicated.
- ☞ Use of foul language, screaming, yelling, calling others’ names in public or private settings.
- ☞ Body language, gestures and tone of voice that communicate the same level of disdain as the first two points. Think about how a sneer, a sarcastic inflection, a dismissive gesture or lack of eye contact can affect how one receives messages.
- ☞ Inappropriate use of an organization’s social networking mechanisms to spread untruths, unsubstantiated rumour and hurtful gossip about clients, co-workers or supervisors.
- ☞ Using cell phones or text messaging in mid-conversation or during an appointment or meeting.
- ☞ Smoking in non-smoking places or smoking in front of non-smokers without asking.

Indeed, new technologies appear to be contributing to this perceived growth in incivility. Most notably is the impact of modern telecommunications on how we interact with one another on a daily basis. The use of e-mails, texting and tweeting has apparently resulted in less courtesy in how we communicate with each other, either on a personal or a business basis. Employers are increasingly being faced with the need to consider how to handle potential disciplinary measures against employees using social networking tools, such as Facebook, to level criticism against the organization, management or co-workers, often in very derogatory and extremely harsh terms. Publicized cases have very recently emerged testing an employee’s right under labour or human rights legislation with regards to the personal use of such tools by employees and on occasion the consequent dismissal of the employees.

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<sup>1</sup> *Employees say they've had enough of incivility, bad manners*: Nicole Jacoby, CNN Financial, New York, November 29, 1999:

<sup>2</sup> *Rude Awakening*: Charlie Gillis, Macleans Magazine, April 05, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: Charlie Gillis

More recently, others would blame the perceived increase in incivility on the current recession and difficult economic times.

*Blame such incivility on greater stress and overburdened workers if you will, but it's still unacceptable behavior that can prove costly to companies in terms of employee morale, productivity and turnover.*<sup>4</sup>

Ronald Alsop noted in his book, *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*, that while boorish behavior cuts across all generations, the *millennials* entering the workforce appear to be accelerating the trend towards less civility when dealing with others. In the above book, he writes that virtually every manager and college professor interviewed related anecdotes about young people who sent curt, sometimes disrespectful texts and e-mails and often failed to show up on time for work or classes.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the first wave of the Millennial Generation — born between 1980 and 2001 — is now entering the labour force, and employers are facing some of the biggest management challenges they've ever encountered. (See newsletter [Accommodating a New Generation of Workers - Issue 4 - 01 09.pdf](#)) However, some would argue that rather than scapegoating the millennials or today's kids as the main source of society's increasing impoliteness, one should also look at the world which adults have created for teenagers.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, most experts tend to agree that one has to also examine the emerging role of civility and the impact of culture in society as a whole.

### **Why is civility important to an organization?**

Whatever the reasons for increased incivility within society or the workplace, organizations may be forced to have to deal with issues surrounding civility in their establishments. As Stephen Paskoff, president and CEO of Atlanta-based ELI Inc. and a provider of ethics and compliance learning solutions, notes:

*Numerous books, white papers and studies in health care, government, manufacturing and professional services and other industrial sectors show that daily incivilities harm the public, organizations, their staffs and overall results. The behaviors causing harm occur routinely. They are not taught in training courses but are transmitted culturally as people absorb behavior akin to the way they learn how to do the operational aspects of their jobs by modeling others.*<sup>7</sup>

Anything that can damage employee morale, contribute to workplace toxicity, affect client and employee relationships, reduce productivity, etc., will eventually affect the bottom line. Some may argue that workplace incivility is just a reflection of incivility in a society as a whole. However, if an organization truly believes that promoting respectful behaviour is an important part of its expressed values and culture, then the organization must place itself on a higher plateau as a component of its daily operations and actions.

*Leaders then need to talk about these standards specifically, link them to business and organizational values and make sure others do the same. This is a long-term commitment, not a single set of e-mails or Web-based videos.*<sup>8</sup>

### **What can employers do to encourage more civility in the workplace?**

Just as in the case of creating and supporting ethical values in an organization, management has to promote civility in how the organization treats its employees and clients and how co-workers treat each

<sup>4</sup> *The Last Word: Social Disgraces*: Ronald J. Alsop, *Workforce Management*, January 2011, p. 34

<sup>5</sup> *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*: Ronald J. Alsop (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> *What does it mean to be civil? 10 rules*: Vancouver Sun, April 8, 2008

<sup>7</sup> *Install Civility as a Business Process*: Stephen Paskoff, *Workforce Management Blog (the Ethical Workplace)*, February 9, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Ibid:

***“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”***

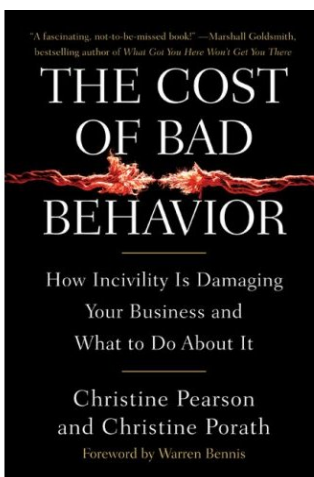
other. Often enough, organizations may have policies and lofty mission and value statements, but fail to back up their vision with action. Remember, values affect attitudes and attitudes affect behaviour. Managers must lead by example. Proven incivility must be dealt with in a serious and objective manner as would any other inappropriate behaviour.

Here are a few pointers that Stephen Paskoff and others suggest would help to ensure that civility is installed as an organizational process:

- ☞ Ensure that respect for others is part and parcel of the organization's value statements.
- ☞ Include expected civil behaviour as part of new employees' orientation, along with specific policies on harassment and violence in the workplace.
- ☞ Ensure that civility matters are initiated and directed by senior leaders responsible for the overall direction of the enterprise. Multiple organizational areas will be involved: including HR, legal, compliance, operations and learning and development. However, without executive leadership, civility won't be taken seriously and won't take root. Civility can't simply be seen as an HR initiative or a risk management process driven by legal counsel or compliance officers.
- ☞ Identify and work to prevent uncivil behaviours that cause the greatest harm.
- ☞ Bring managers together and ask them to identify their biggest operational concerns concerning civility matters.
- ☞ Demonstrate how uncivil behaviour can lead to serious harm in the organization. To do this, create a brief case where leaders and others exhibit common problem behaviours occurring in their workplaces.
- ☞ Offer individuals help to deal with inappropriate behaviour (incl. anger management therapy) via individual counselling either internally or externally through employee assistance programs.
- ☞ Deal with incivility in the same way as the organizational complaint, compliance and disciplinary processes handle other recurring negative behavioural traits.

In examining issues related to workplace civility, it is essential that one first start by looking closely at the current organizational culture, including inherent values and related policies/processes.

### **Recommended Reading:**



### ***“The Cost of Bad Behavior”***

*(Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It)*

by Christine Pearson & Christine Porath  
(Portfolio Press, July 2009)

### **Recommended Web Sites:**

- ◆ The Civility Experts - Lew Bayer: <http://corporatecivility.com/>
- ◆ The Civility Institute – U. of Prince Edward Island: <http://civilityinstitute.com/>
- ◆ Civility Website – John Hopkins University: <http://krieger.jhu.edu/civility>
- ◆ E.L.I. – Build a Civil Workplace: <http://www.eliinc.com/>
- ◆ IGC – The Civility Experts: <http://civilityexperts.com/>

***“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”***