Require Civility: *5 Reasons Why We Need Respectful Cultures*

By Linda Fisher Thornton

Civility is the great "undiscussable" in many organizations today. Red-faced Vice Presidents belittle each other during monthly meetings, employees are told to "just take it" when they are verbally harassed, and well-meaning workers are disciplined harshly in front of colleagues. As far as employees are concerned, once we have allowed these behaviors to go on for a while, we have 'endorsed' them through our silence. And after employees sense that we have 'endorsed' them, those negative behaviors begin to spread throughout the organization.

Why would any leader 'endorse' negative behaviors and allow them to continue? One reason may be that interpersonal behaviors are difficult to talk about, and communicating specific behavioral standards makes some leaders uncomfortable. When we talk about interpersonal behavior, we get into discussions about self-awareness, and self-control. Some leaders might ask, "Are these things that business leaders should be talking about? Aren't they *personal*?"

The Aftermath of Incivility

While self-awareness and self-control are *personal,* they also have major *interpersonal*

implications. It may be *difficult* to talk about the importance of treating others with respect

and civility, but it is much more difficult to deal with the way people treat each other in the

aftermath of *incivility*. When we fail to create a respectful work environment, we end up dealing

with the other (more difficult) problems that can arise because of our failure to set boundaries.

Retention problems, grievances, lawsuits, lack of engagement and employee stress erode the

health and well-being of employees and the productivity of the organization.

Setting Behavioral Boundaries

The *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary* defines civility as "polite, reasonable and

respectful behavior." Whether or not it makes us uncomfortable to communicate and enforce

ground rules for civility, it is our duty as leaders to deal with uncivil behavior directly. It is our

responsibility to set specific behavioral ground rules that include respectful behavior and to help

others learn how to follow them. These interpersonal ground rules are the boundaries that we use

to build a civil workplace.

In his article *Workplace Incivility and the Management of Human Capital*, *Donald

Zauderer* identifies these examples of incivility in the workplace:

- Pouncing on every mistake
- Being tough, demanding, threatening, unsympathetic
- Debasing less powerful employees
- Admonishing employees in front of peers

Acts of incivility erode trust and increase employee stress. Not only should leaders avoid

behaviors like these, but they should also communicate the clear expectations for civil

interpersonal behavior that prevent them.

5 Reasons to Require Civility

Here are 5 compelling reasons why we should require civil behavior:

1. **Incivility escalates if left unchecked**

Incivility does not tend to improve on its own without leader intervention. In fact, it can lead to hostility and even aggression. *Pearson, Andersson, and Porath* in *Workplace Incivility* note that "if leaders do not respond when incivility occurs, low-intensity breaches of conduct can ignite hostility, offend witnesses and others who hear about the interaction, and even escalate to physical aggression."

While it may be difficult to deal with acts of incivility like blaming, belittling and verbal attacks, these are usually only the beginning. If we fail to respond quickly, making it clear that such incivility is not acceptable, we can expect things to get worse. As leaders, we must stop negative interpersonal behaviors before they gain traction and begin to escalate.

2. Incivility harms

There is a growing awareness of our leadership responsibility to honor human rights and human dignity, and it requires that we work diligently to avoid harm. *Giacalone and Promislo* describe a necessary shift from a focus on an organization-centered worldview and financial concerns to a human-centered view that "encompasses the impact that unethical behavior has on well-being at the individual, group and societal levels." Included in their definition of "unethical behavior" are snubbing, bullying, humiliation, abusive supervision, offensive jokes, discrimination, and harassment.

We may know from our own experience that incivility creates stress and makes it difficult for us to concentrate on our work. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University have confirmed that the effects of psychological stress can promote the development and progression of disease. Because incivility increases stress in the organization, and because prolonged stress has negative effects on human health and well-being, incivility harms.

3. Civil behavior is ethical behavior

Civility is an important part of ethical behavior in organizations. *Hester and Killian* in *The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership* point out that "We can't speak about ethics and moral behaviors without talking about community, issues of morality exposed by human need, and the moral role that civility plays in the leadership culture." Ethics is about thinking beyond our own interests, respecting the rights and dignity of others, and preventing harm. Because incivility harms, it is more than an annoyance – it is an ethical problem.

4. **In a civil workplace, employees can do their best work**

Leadership is fundamentally about people and relationships. We want people to be able to focus on meeting organizational goals, not on dealing with unnecessary interpersonal tension. *Donald Zauderer* wrote that "when people work in a civil environment, more of their collective energy is available for strengthening organizational performance." Requiring respectful interpersonal behavior frees up valuable energy and productivity needed to get the job done.

5. **Our connected global society requires civil behavior**

Our connectedness through social media allows us to see the impact of uncivil acts clearly. Every day there are new YouTube videos, photographs, blog posts and articles about the need for civility as we try to solve complex global problems across borders and boundaries.

Due to the work of collaborative groups of global business leaders such as *The Caux Roundtable*, there is increasing global clarity about what "ethical behavior" is and what "ethical organizations" look like. The emerging standard is one of

- respectful, ethical cultures,
- where there is a high level of trust and a low level of stress,
- where civil behavior is modeled by leaders, and
- where civility is required throughout the organization.

As business leaders in a global society, we need to respond to this global clarity about the need for respect in order to fulfill our ethical leadership obligations.

The Need For Respectful, Ethical Cultures

Respect is the *minimum* standard for interpersonal behavior in a responsible business. We should be doing so much more – supporting people's success at work, helping them realize their potential, and helping them find meaning in their work. These things require much more than just respectful behavior, but an environment of respect is a necessary starting point toward the important leadership goal of bringing out the best in people.

We can be part of the movement *away from* unchecked incivility and *toward* civility. As *Howard Gardner*, author of *Five Minds for the Future* said "I have nothing against excellence, but at the end of the day we do not need more of the best and the brightest, but we need more of those who have good character. That is why the issues of respect and ethics, which are hard to measure objectively, are so terribly important."

Building a respected brand in a global marketplace requires a commitment to caring about people, providing value through our products and services, and building a culture of trust. If incivility is affecting our employees, we can be sure that it is also affecting the customer experience and the overall reputation of our brand. Choosing to lead with respect and requiring respectful behavior protects the future of our organization.

Making Civility a Leadership Development Priority

Is leading with respect and civility a priority in our leadership development programs? Do we help leaders learn what it looks like, and provide the opportunity for them to practice it? Do they understand how incivility harms? Even though it is not easy, we must

- Require civil behavior,
- Model respectful behavior in every setting, and
- Make civil behavior a leadership development priority.

According to the *Institute for Civility*, "Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity,

needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process...and it begins with us." As

leaders, we communicate the performance and behavior boundaries that guide our organizations.

Let's be sure that those boundaries include civil behavior.

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