Creating a Civil & Respectful Workplace

Essential Guide

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How to Create a Civil & Respectful Workplace

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), rather than dwelling on legal standards and what **not** to do, organizations, managers and employees should focus on **what to do**—the words and actions that promote respect and fairness, and everyone's responsibilities for contributing to respect in the workplace.

This subject area has been evolving for decades and has grown with changing societal standards, legal and regulatory developments, and an increased understanding of the relationship between social issues in the workplace and the value of such initiatives to virtually everyone.

This essential guide presents facts about the many dimensions of a **Civil and Respectful Workplace** which are integral parts of organizational culture and success. It also provides recommendations for next steps to foster a civil and respectful workplace and addresses ways that organizations can identify and evolve their own points of view and initiatives to recognize these issues in the context of their workplaces.

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The Workplace and Society

The workplace is a reflection of society at large. Today, we see a society that too often demonstrates a lack of respect and civility, both inside and outside the workplace. Studies and polls indicate that Americans view incivility as a serious problem that is getting worse. One study found that 60% of employees believe coworkers' annoying behaviors negatively impact the workplace and as a result, 40% reported they are looking for new employment. These and other findings illustrate that disrespectful and uncivil behaviors drain productivity and negatively influence an organization's bottom line and the overall economy.

Conversations about how employees treat one another are taking place everywhere these days: online; among family, friends, and coworkers; in the media, entertainment, and business world, and even in the halls of government. In many organizations, disrespectful conduct is so troublesome that the EEOC created a task force to study uncivil and disrespectful workplaces. In its report, the task force found approximately 80% of allegations of hostile and rude behavior targeted female or non-white employees. Such uncivil and disrespectful behavior also targets employees because of their age, disability, national origin, or religion. It's no surprise that organizations interested in fostering a civil and respectful workplace are likely to run into challenges achieving this goal.

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Civility vs. Incivility in the Workplace

Incivility is rude, discourteous behavior that shows low regard for others, violating norms of mutual respect in social interactions.

Incivility is in the eyes of the recipient and it varies not only by individual but also by culture, generation, gender and organization. In studies of attorneys and court employees, researchers found significant correlations between incivility and sexual harassment. Researchers have also found that uncivil behaviors can escalate into harassing behaviors.

Civility is the act of showing regard for others by being polite and demonstrating respect. While workplace civility is not a new concept, it is receiving more attention of late. A high-profile example is Google's new communications policy, which is a response to employee complaints about rising incivility and harassment on internal platforms. The problem, however, is far more widespread and occurs in a myriad of companies across a variety of industries. Studies link civility with optimism, which is seeing the upside in events and the tendency to look at the positive side of any situation. Optimism is highly motivational and one foundation of success.

Optimistic employees work harder, longer and with a more innovative spirit, but optimism must be infused in the workplace through the company's values. Workplace optimism and the dedication to civil and respectful conduct is a cultural attribute nurtured by managers and put into practice by everyone.

Incivility is Rampant

"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.***"

—Christine Porath, HBR

Costs of Incivility in the Workplace

Studies show that ethical lapses are more likely to happen when an organization's culture is uncivil. Incivility may lead to more serious hostile behaviors, such as harassment, bullying, and workplace violence.

Employees who perceive or experience incivility are at greater risk of:

- Mental health problems
- Decreased job satisfaction and loyalty to their employer
- Increased job turnover
- Retaliation from and toward the perpetrator

Benefits of a Civil and Respectful Workplace

Research findings indicate employees who are treated with respect and civility are more likely to be productive, collaborative and safe:

Productivity - Employees who are not distracted or impeded by disrespectful and rude behavior are able to concentrate on their tasks and objectives.

Collaboration - Productive collaboration depends on trust, respect, and courtesy. It's easy to hold everyone accountable when they're not worried about rudeness and unwarranted attacks.

Safety - Thoughtful and confident employees avoid accidents and harmful actions because they care about coworkers and their organization.

Why Workplace Civility Matters

Beyond the harm that uncivil and disrespectful behavior causes employees, it hurts the organization as a whole.

When employers consider the costs of workplace harassment, they often focus on legal expenses, and with good reason. As the EEOC task force reported, every year, organizations pay hundreds of millions of dollars in legal fines and settlements to millions of workers who allege others' negative behaviors negatively impact their work. Beyond that, such work environments eventually undermine all employees. The more profound costs of an uncivil and disrespectful workplace include decreased productivity, increased turnover, and reputational harm to the business—which, in turn, damage employee performance, productivity, recruitment, retention, and ultimately, the bottom line.

According to the EEOC, there are profound costs associated with a disrespectful workplace:

48%
of victims intentionally decreased their work effort

47%
intentionally decreased the time spent at work

38%
intentionally decreased the quality of their work

80%
spent work time worrying about the incident(s)

63%
lost work time avoiding harassing coworkers

66%
lowered their performance

78%
lowered their commitment to the organization

12%
quit their job due to the uncivil treatment

Common Workplace Challenges that May Lead to Incivility

Many workplaces continue to suffer from harassment, discrimination, violence, divisiveness, and other harmful conduct that undermine a welcoming and productive workplace and limits business success.

Even conduct that may not rise to the level of harassment, discrimination, or other destructive behaviors still negatively impacts a workplace.

Consider these types of harmful conduct:

- An excessive workload and lack of support
- Concerns about management's ability to lead the team, department, or company forward successfully
- Anxiety about the future, particularly longer-term job and retirement security
- Lack of challenge when boredom intensifies existing frustration
- The lack of recognition, promotion, and salary for the level of employee contribution

Sources of Disrespectful Conduct

At work, employees tend to form social groups of like-minded individuals. Whether done intentionally or not, these groups may exclude other coworkers. Excluding others devalues those outside a group and causes employees to miss the benefit that others unlike themselves offer to the organization. This can lead to increased animosity among staff.

Following are common sources of disrespectful conduct:

- Bias (including unconscious bias)
- Ingroup/outgroup friction
- Cultural differences
- Social media
- Abuse of power
- Low rate of speaking up

Low Rate of Speaking Up

Employees who experience harmful behavior may remain silent for any number of reasons, including:

- They anticipate no one will take their concerns seriously.
- They believe that no substantive action will be taken after they speak up.
- They fear that, somehow, they will be blamed for another's negative behavior.
- They are anxious about social retaliation (including humiliation and ostracism).
- They may believe it's better to remain silent out of fear of workplace retaliation, such as damage to their career and reputation.

The last bullet is a strong reason why targets or witnesses of uncivil and disrespectful behavior do not report it. One study found that 75% of employees who spoke out against workplace mistreatment faced some form of retaliation. Such findings raise serious concerns.

Conversely, coworkers who respond to disagreements and other differences with shouting, blaming others, or an inability to find an agreeable resolution create a toxic workplace culture.

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What Makes for a Civil and Respectful Workplace

> **To counter fear, anxiety and the foregone conclusion that the employer isn't particularly focused on a civil and respectful workplace, civility and respect must permeate the organization.**

Thoughtful dialogue about respect and fair treatment in the workplace can prevent a toxic culture from taking hold. Building a workplace culture of civility and respect costs little, but the impact will be enormous. In a business climate where rising tensions seem inevitable, making one's workplace a safe space for everyone is not only a responsibility but an opportunity to create greater success.

It Starts at the Top

Employees who feel respected are more likely to be engaged, live better and be happier. The vast majority report greater satisfaction with their jobs. Those with authority need to manage with the following principles to create a civil and respectful workplace:

- ***Trust***
- ***Honesty***
- ***Courtesy***
- ***Accountability***
- ***Integrity***

Leaders set the tone for workplace culture and have the responsibility to model civil and respectful behavior.

By swiftly responding to instances of rudeness and harassment, leaders send the message that uncivil and disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated. Leaders can also measure and reward civility in performance reviews or through awards and public acknowledgment and other forms of recognition.

Further, managers, human resources, and other support staff must take employees' concerns seriously and act appropriately in resolving any issue. Employees play a role, too. Besides leadership setting the tone, all managers and non-managers have responsibilities to foster a civil and respectful workplace. Together, everyone at a workplace has a role that benefits all.

NEW CIVIL AND RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE RESOURCES

To learn more about this important topic, we recommend our online *Industry Resources* and our *Ethics & Compliance Catalog*, where you can learn more about our elearning libraries and courses, workshops, ethical snapshots, hotline services and employee communication tools.

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