



The Baltimore Workplace Civility Study

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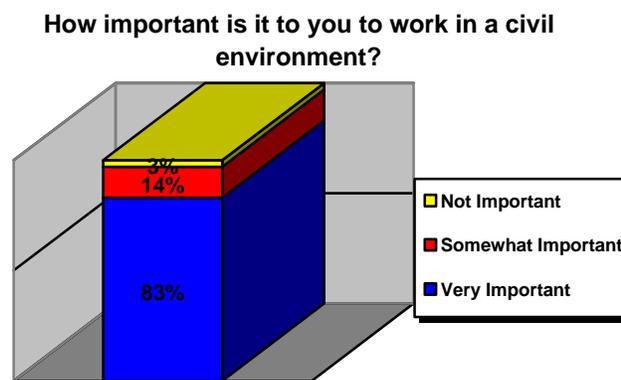
Survey Methodology

The Baltimore Workplace Civility Study began as a collaboration between the University of Baltimore's Jacob France Institute, the John Hopkins University, and local business leaders. A survey was designed and in the spring of 2000, a random sample of 400 employees from four Baltimore area industries participated in the study (Non-Profit, Manufacturing, Business Services, Bio-Sciences). A total of 130 surveys were received; a return rate of 32.5%. Respondents were asked to consider uncivil behavior they had encountered over the year preceding the survey and respond accordingly. Uncivil behavior was defined as "actions or verbal exchanges you would consider rude, disrespectful, dismissive, threatening, demeaning, or inappropriate".

Overall Perceptions of Civility

In general, the majority of respondents (67%) indicated that they felt society had become less civil in the previous year. Fewer (25%) felt that their workplace had become less civil over this year.

The large majority reported that it was "very important" to work in a civil environment (83%). Only 3% felt that this was "not important".



Perceptions of Acceptable/Uncivil/Violent Workplace Behavior

There was the most agreement on what could be considered "uncivil" behavior for the following survey items:

1. Taking, without asking, a co-worker's food from the office refrigerator (93%).
2. Refusing to work hard on a team effort project (90%).
3. Shifting the blame for your mistake to a co-worker (88%).
4. Reading someone else's mail (88%).
5. Neglecting to say please/thank you (88%).

Surprisingly, the following items were reported to be "acceptable workplace behavior" by some respondents:

1. Taking the last cup of coffee without making a new pot (20%).
2. Not returning telephone calls and/or e-mails (17%).
3. Ignoring a co-worker (12%).

The following items were considered “violent workplace behavior”:

1. Pushing a co-worker out of your way in the heat of an argument (85%).
2. Yelling at a co-worker (59%).
3. Firing a subordinate in the heat of an argument (41%).
4. A supervisor harshly criticizing a subordinate in public (34%).
5. Using foul language in the workplace (28%).

It is interesting that only one of the behaviors listed above is overtly physical; the others, while verbal, are nevertheless considered “violent”.

Frequency of Workplace Incivility

More than one third of respondents felt they had been a victim of uncivil workplace behavior either “occasionally” or “frequently” in the past year (36%). A larger number witnessed what they considered to be uncivil behavior (65%) occasionally/frequently. Surprisingly, 11% admitted that they were occasional or frequent perpetrators of uncivil behavior.

Of the self-reported victims of uncivil behavior, 33% stated that the incidents were frequent (5 or more times), while 8% reported frequencies exceeding 10 times. Only 13% reported that uncivil behavior was an isolated incident.



Responses to Incivility

When asked to consider the single act of workplace incivility that bothered them most and how they responded, the most frequently cited actions included:

1. Discussed the incident with friends/family outside of work (88%).
2. Discussed the incident with co-workers (85%).
3. Contemplated changing jobs (70%).
4. Felt less of a commitment to the organization (63%).
5. Confronted the instigator (44%).

Additional responses to incivility that could have an economic impact on an organization included:

1. Decreased your effort at work (37%).
2. Lost work time by calling in sick (9%).
3. Utilized health care/employee assistance benefits (13%).

Few felt that sexual harassment was a factor in the incident (7%), but a greater number felt that racism was a factor (16%). Less than a quarter of respondents sought help within the organization (23%). While 56% reached resolution (17% with organizational help, 39% without), 44% did not resolve the issue.

Demographic Issues

When questioned about gender, the majority said that females were the perpetrators of the uncivil incident (66%). A caveat to keep in mind is that the large majority of survey respondents were women (72%). However, these data could suggest that women perceive incivility more frequently from other women than from men.

The average age of respondents was 37 (ages ranged from 19 to 60), and the majority said the perpetrator was older (55%), was their superior (53%), and was the same race (58%).

Organizational Policy/Response Issues

More than one third of respondents said their company had no policy regarding professional interpersonal contact, or that they were unsure if one exists (36%). Of those who reported a policy in place, 50% felt it wasn't clearly communicated to employees. Approximately 50% of respondents said their company had a grievance process. Of these, less than half (44%) felt that their complaints were considered confidential.

An overwhelming 84% believed that efforts to improve civility in their workplace would increase their personal productivity, and 73% wanted to see official efforts to foster workplace civility.

The large majority felt that the following would be helpful:

1. Keeping stress and fatigue at manageable levels (96%).
2. A grievance process to handle complaints of incivility (95%).
3. Looking for positive interpersonal skills in prospective employees (91%).
4. Clear, written policy on interpersonal conduct (90%).
5. Adopting flexibility in scheduling, assignments, and work-life issues (90%).

Comment Section - Qualitative Summary

Some common issues arose in the comment section of the survey. These included communication difficulties with colleagues of different cultures, lack of respect to support staff, basic lack of consideration (e.g., cleaning common areas), inappropriate use of the Internet, lack of flexibility for working mothers, and lack of privacy (cubicles).

Several respondents stated that the highest ranking person in their organization treated employees as if they were easily interchangeable/replaceable. They stated that employees were rarely addressed by name or acknowledged in meetings. This attitude has subsequently filtered down through the organizational ranks and become part of the workplace "culture". Lack of respect for employees is tolerated and practiced by many of the supervisory staff - they have seen the behavior originate from the top down, and it has become pervasive throughout the organization.

Civility Research

As organizations have flattened and gone “casual/informal”, there are fewer norms as to what constitutes proper business behavior. Research has shown that most acts of workplace violence originate with uncivil behavior. Moreover, an uncivil work environment can have an economic impact on an organization. Employees encountering workplace incivility have reported less commitment to their company, lost productivity, and some have left their jobs.

P.M. Forni is the co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project and author of the book “Choosing Civility”. Professor Forni collaborated in the Baltimore Workplace Civility Study and offers the following insights from his book:

“No workplace in the world is as diverse as the American one. Fostering a workplace culture of civil openness and inclusion is clearly in the interest of most American organizations today. This is the culture of the future, which will allow organizations to do well in the global civilization of the new millennium”.

“It’s not unreasonable to predict that lower-stress workplaces-workplaces, that is, where a culture of civility makes for better relationships among coworkers-will become very appealing. These are the workplaces where organizations will manage to attract and retain an increasing number of first-rate workers. This should be a strong incentive for organizations to promote a culture of civility in their workplaces”.

“Encouraging civility in the workplace is becoming one of the fundamental corporate goals in our diverse, hurried, stressed, and litigation-prone society. A civil workplace is good for workers, since the workers’ quality of life is improved in such an environment. But a civil workplace is also good for the customers, since the quality of the service they receive from happier and more relaxed service providers is improved”.

A 1999 civility study was conducted through the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of NC, Chapel Hill and included 775 respondents (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). As a result of an incident of uncivil behavior, 28% reported they had lost work time avoiding instigator, 53% lost work time worrying, 37% felt less organizational commitment, 22% decreased work effort, 10% decreased amount of time at work, 46% contemplated changing jobs, 12% changed jobs. A total of 78% of managers felt that incivility has increased over the past 10 years.

An online survey was conducted by the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying in September, 2000. The number of respondents was 1,335, which is the largest sample of its kind. This organization defines bullying as “the deliberate repeated, hurtful verbal mistreatment of a person (target) by a cruel perpetrator (bully).

Some of their key findings include:

1. Women bully as frequently as men – there is a 50% split.
2. Women target women 84% of time, Men target women 69% of time - overall, women are targets 75% of the time.
3. The majority of bullies are supervisors (81%).
4. Health hazards - 41% surveyed were diagnosed with depression, 80% reported symptoms that decreased their productivity at work (loss of sleep, anxiety, inability to concentrate), 31% of women and 21% of men exhibited symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

5. In only 7% of cases were bullies punished, transferred, or terminated - HR/Organization isn't providing support.
6. A total of 79% of targets frequently/constantly think about past bullying.

The best estimate of the prevalence of "bullying" is 21% of all workers; this figure is based on random survey of Michigan residents in 2000 by Wayne State University.

Research has shown incivility to be highly correlated with crime; minor acts of incivility gradually increase to more serious levels (Goldstein, 1994; Taylor & Gottsfredson, 1986). In the workplace, it has been suggested that violence is rarely a spontaneous event, but rather an escalating pattern of negative interactions that culminate in workplace violence (Baron & Newuman, 1996; Kinney, 1995). Incivility can be viewed as a precursor to workplace violence.

Workplace civility can be defined as "behaviors that help to preserve the norms for mutual respect in the workplace; civility reflects concern for others" (Andersson, 1999). Conversely, workplace incivility can be defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect; uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson, 1999).

With incivility, a distinguishing characteristic is that the intent to harm is ambiguous. It depends on perceptions of the instigator, the target, and observers (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997; Kramer, 1994; Morrill, 1992). Ambiguity makes it difficult to study actions objectively; multiple interpretations must be considered. In addition, norms as to what constitutes civil behavior erode as employees witness incivility - it can spiral and spread throughout the organization (Carter, 1998).

A 1999 survey was conducted by ETICON, Etiquette Consultants for Business, in Columbia, SC. A sample of 1,281 business professionals across the United States were surveyed, and 80% felt that rudeness in business was increasing. When asked how they respond to rude employee behavior, 58% reported that they would take their business elsewhere, even if it is out of the way or costs more. Conversely, in response to employee behavior that they admire, appreciate and respect, 42% of respondents would go out of their way to conduct business with these firms. The bottom line is that it costs businesses more to attract new customers than to retain existing ones, and most organizations do not focus on customer retention.

It is important to cultivate a climate of civility within the workplace. Failure to do so can have a negative impact on organizations, both in terms of morale and productivity.

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