



## Civility and Incivility

### Background

Incivility is often perpetrated by a manager, but it can also come from a rude and disrespectful peer. Behaviours vary from malice (for example, door slamming and insults) to thoughtlessness and passive aggressiveness (for example, overly focusing on negatives and unfair blaming). Arguably the less obvious forms of incivility are the most insidious because it's harder to pinpoint and prove.

Almost everybody who experiences workplace incivility will respond in a negative way, and the one positive is its role in bonding people around a shared dislike of the perpetrator. Negative reactions can be passive (withdrawing), or reactive (retaliating) and indicate a *heightened stress response which costs worker mental health* and ultimately the organisational bottom line.

This knowledge digest reviews:

- Porath and Pearson 2013, [The Price of Incivility](#), Harvard Business Review, February 2013.
- WorkSafe Victoria's information and advice on [poor workplace relationships](#), a [psychosocial hazard](#).

### The costs of incivility

In one data set (a poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries) it was found that those on the receiving end of incivility responded in the following ways:

- 48% intentionally decreased their work effort.
- 47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work.
- 38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work.
- 80% lost work time worrying about the incident.
- 63% lost work time avoiding the offender.
- 66% said that their performance declined.
- 78% said that their commitment to the organization declined.
- 12% said that they left their job because of the uncivil treatment.
- 25% admitted to taking their frustration out on customers.

Other negative impacts that cost organisations include lower rates of:

- Retention
- Creativity
- Quality of work
- Team morale

Even witnessing incivility is found to have negative consequence for wellbeing and performance. Managers at Fortune1000 firms spend the equivalent of seven weeks a year dealing with the aftermath of incivility.



### What can be done to curtail incivility?

Clearly prevention is better than a cure, but what can be done to prevent or stamp out this insidious form of workplace harm? A summary of the tips and strategies to prevent or stop rudeness creeping into everyday interactions in this article is as follows:

- Manage yourself: Set the tone. Model good behaviour, even if your manager is acting poorly. Monitor and adjust your own behaviour, keep an 'incivility journal' to support reflection in your awareness and change process. Ask your team if there's anything they'd like you do better and accept criticism.
- Consider and value civility in the hiring process: Look for evidence of the ability to be civil in employee candidates.
- Recognise and reward good behaviour: Express your appreciation. Measure, track and reward civility and positivity in performance reviews.
- Teach civility: Often people don't recognise their behaviour as uncivil. Use video and role-playing to improve civility (there are some interesting examples of this kind of intervention in the article) Start a dialogue about expectations.
- Don't be avoidant: Identify, address, and correct any troublesome behaviour. Take complaints seriously, follow up on complaints. In pre-departure interviews, if answers to the question of why someone is leaving are vague, do a post-departure interview a few months later. With time and distance people are more likely to tell the real reason why they left.
- Penalise bad behaviour: Don't move offenders to a different area, don't be afraid to let someone go.

## WorkSafe Victoria

### Introduction

According to WorkSafe incivility is one of a range of harmful practices that causes poor workplace relationships. The Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act) requires employers to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Poor workplace relationships are a [psychosocial hazard](#), a risk to employee health and wellbeing that requires controls. Poor workplace relationships are defined as the presence of:

- workplace bullying, aggression, harassment, sexual harassment and gendered violence, discrimination or other unreasonable behaviour by colleagues, supervisors or clients;
- poor relationships between employees and their managers, supervisors, colleagues and clients or others the employee has to interact with;
- conflict between employees and their managers, supervisors or colleagues. This becomes worse if managers are reluctant to deal with inappropriate behaviours;
- lack of fairness and equity in dealing with organisational issues or where performance issues are poorly managed.



## **What can be done to curtail incivility?**

### Risk control measures.

According to WorkSafe appropriate risk controls focus on job design, work environment and working conditions. This includes:

- Reducing task and relationship conflict
- Encouraging teamwork
- Clearly defining roles
- Encourage communication and educate employees on appropriate workplace behaviours, and how to deal with conflict.

### General advice

WorkSafe also give some advice on ways to manage relationship conflict at work, namely:

- Ensure there is a code of conduct and enforce the code.
- Set team rules of engagement or collaboratively develop a team charter.
- Role modelling of appropriate workplace behaviours.
- Coach individual employees who are demonstrating poor workplace behaviours.
- Provide conflict management training to all employees to teach them how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations.
- Train managers how to identify a conflict situation and resolve it early.
- Manage people issues and their resolution in a consistent and timely manner.
- Support open communication and encouraging employees to share their concerns about work-related conflict at an early stage.
- Develop and implement formal and informal confidential complaint-handling processes to enable the reporting of inappropriate behaviours.
- Provide conflict resolution processes such as mediation, facilitated discussions or conflict coaching as options for resolving complaints of inappropriate behaviour.
- Arrange independent investigations into serious allegations of misconduct and then following up on identified issues.
- Training and inducting employees so they are aware of appropriate work behaviours, for example, civility training.