

## **CONDUCT UNBECOMING**

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A number of years ago, I spoke at a session of IFMA's World Workplace that I titled, "Acting Like a Leader in a Hostile Work Environment." Having done several WWP sessions throughout my facility management career, I was expecting the usual turnout—perhaps 50 or 75 people; certainly no more than 100.

To my utter astonishment, nearly 300 people crowded into the room, some standing along the sides and in the back. I was passionate about my topic and I proceeded to share the principles I had formulated during a terrible year in which I had project-managed the build-out of 75,000 square feet of office space in a retail shopping center. I truly enjoyed working with the architects and designers and furniture installers because I am motivated by creating great working relationships. But I had to work with people who frequently went beyond being merely difficult; one of them was downright cruel, all the way through the project and long afterward.

As I presented my principles during that session, the nods of recognition, laughter, and those powerful moments for a speaker when the vibe one receives makes it clear one has hit a nerve were evident. I ended my talk and began to gather my computer and notes as audience members walked up to me to hand me their business cards and tell of their own dealings with rudeness, disruptive behavior, insolence, and unfairness at work. I stood for an hour listening, empathizing, and encouraging. They wanted to tell their stories. They wanted to add their voices to mine as I validated their experiences by pointing out that people with whom we work can make our lives miserable, and not only do they not care; frequently, no one *else* seems to care enough to make it stop.

I have been working the principles I forged into a book (any of you who work for publishing companies and are chummy with acquisitions editors, please note my contact information!) that offer a map for making it through unending daily treachery and incivility. I don't think it takes rocket science to put a finger on the map of workplace dissatisfaction and find that just about anywhere, the lack of civil, respectful, values-centered behavior is a paramount reason for dysfunctional workplaces.

### **War Stories—We All Have Some (and don't they still make your blood pressure rise?)**

Consider what you've seen of incivility on the job. Have you ever experienced any of these?

- A coworker prints out a nasty email to a networked printer in the office, detailing why everyone hates you; you find it in the printer before the coworker picks it up.
- You routinely avoid meetings in which a particular coworker regularly exhibits offensive behavior (constant interruptions, arrogance, dismissive attitude).
- You walk up to a group of people you assume to be friendly and find they all suddenly stop talking; you sense tension and surmise they were talking about you.
- You witness a superior openly scolding a subordinate in front of others.
- A coworker frequently assumes you will do as he/she tells you to do without ever simply asking if you will help.
- Temper tantrums are tolerated.
- The suggestions or ideas you or another employee offer are rudely dismissed.
- You or someone you know have been called "stupid" by a supervisor.
- A coworker routinely speaks of personal business that is distracting or offensive.

You get the picture. You have your own examples, your own *memories* of incidents you have witnessed or in which you were targeted by someone. Some of us will never forget these moments.

### **Bad Behavior with Clients is Unforgiveable—So Why is it Okay with Coworkers?**

Many of you work for companies that deal regularly with clients, customers, or investors. Most of the leaders in those companies would not tolerate rudeness, obscenity, or disrespect directed at the people who are the reason for their existence.

Bad behavior toward customers ends up in phone calls or letters to management. In this day and age, it can be broadcast to vast numbers of people through a blog posting, Twitter, a Facebook comment, or someone egregiously mistreated putting up a website like IHateXYZCompany.com. Reactions such as these can be extremely damaging. Some issues even end up on the evening news and, as we know, can be picked up by national news outlets, damaging brands and destroying the reputation of particular locations. Offenders and their managers can lose their jobs.

A friend of mine was recently frustrated by an experience she had at a Ritz-Carlton Hotel in a southern city. The inability of the staff to resolve a problem they created irritated her, particularly since it was so easy to remedy. She loves the Ritz-Carlton chain and likes to talk about its gold standard of customer satisfaction. What the staff of this hotel could not have known is that she is a consultant and Fast Company Magazine expert blogger, and she wrote about her experience for many thousands to read. I and other colleagues are waiting to see how the Ritz-Carlton will respond, as they're sure to hear about her complaint.

We know how much trouble we can land in when we ignore our clients or customers. Investors have been known to yank funding when shockingly poor behavior offends them. Employers have been known not to hire a prospective high level employee because of the way he or she treated the waiter at an interview lunch in a fine restaurant. The assumption is that if low level staff are treated poorly, this may translate to clients.

But glaring incivility among employees, on the job, day after day, often beginning in the president's office, is ignored as though it is the cost of doing business. The problem is that while everyone understands the impact of losing clients, few consider the real impact of workplace incivility.

### **It's the Reactions That Throw Money Out the Window**

I'd like you to think about those incidents of incivility you've personally encountered. I'd like you to remember what you experienced, how you felt, and what you did as a result. Focus on one or two memorable instances.

- Did you leave early because you felt demoralized and couldn't stay in the office for another hour?
- Did you deliberately avoid responding to the offender?
- Did you withhold help from the offender?
- Did you tell someone else at work about the incident, either in person or by email?
- Did you find yourself taking the incident home with you, essentially spoiling your evening or your weekend?
- Did you dread going in on Monday because the offender made you feel as though you didn't want to face going to work?
- Have you ever left a job because you could no longer deal with continued bad behavior at work?

You see, it's not always the actual incident of incivility that costs a company. It is the reaction of the person offended. Any one of these reactions to workplace incivility means decreased productivity at the least, and outright loss of valuable employees at the most. Sometimes it even results in sabotage or violence that can be extremely costly on several levels.

Here's the problem: we are experiencing a values crisis in this country. While in many ways, our openness in recent decades has proved refreshing and freeing, in many other ways it has become destructive as we have thrown off respectful restraint.

### **Does My Character Look Like Swiss Cheese?**

These days it seems we run into people whose character is full of holes. They may be excellent at the technical skills required for their jobs, but their behavior is downright boorish. They have not been taught good manners. They do not know how to treat others respectfully or kindly. They do not know why such things are important. They may have been raised in an atmosphere where values were not emphasized. It used to be a given that parents taught children that it was rude to stare, wrong to talk back to a teacher, and punishment was forthcoming if one cursed or swore in a certain environment.

People have been treated horribly at work since the beginning of time, so this is not a trip down the memory lane of delusion. It's just that for so long, we were an essentially respectful society, at least on the surface. Standards for conduct and deportment were emphasized at home and in school. People tipped their hats to each other on the street. They dressed up to go to baseball games. They would not think of speaking impatiently to a customer. Their outward behavior may have been dishonest, but it was at least discreet, and that's something. Even psychopaths figure out how to fit in and look like they know the rules of social discourse. When the rules become filled with holes, so does character. When the standards are unfortified, so is behavior.

### **You Have to be Taught How to Be Human**

Humans must be reared to be human. We don't pick this stuff upon our own. Values and behavior must be taught and emphasized. Unlike other species, not a whole lot of critical social interaction skills come to us instinctively. A prairie dog or meercat doesn't need to be taught how to relate to the pack. Elephants don't have to be trained to stay with their herd. Lion cubs don't go to Lion Behavior School to figure out how to interact with the pride. Something inside of them simply knows how it works. They're born with it, and they can't help but act it out. It comes from the inside out.

Humans, on the other hand, may have a lot of instinctual behaviors, but most of them need to be regulated so that we can manage the day-to-day social intercourse in which we all must operate. We have to be taught not to belch or spit in public. We must be told that it is polite to say thank you, that we don't cut in front of others in line, that you don't act like a clown at a funeral or get so drunk at someone's wedding that you disrupt the reception. Clearly, we are failing at a lot of these, but the fact remains that in order to act like self-aware human beings who understand the ramifications of our behavior, we must be taught.

### **Communicating Ethical, Principled, Mature Standards of Conduct**

Values must be taught and reinforced. It's best when we learn such things as children and have an opportunity to make them second nature. What we see happening today is evidence that folks we're hiring didn't get a lot of good home training, and so we must provide training in the basics, such as:

- It's a sign of respect to your employer to show up for work on time.
- Don't sneeze into your hand and then extend it for a handshake.
- Come to an important meeting dressed appropriately instead of looking as though you are about to head out to the beach (unless everyone else is dressed that way).
- Talking on the phone with your best friend all day is a big signal you aren't working.
- Your supervisor actually *does* have a right to tell you what to do, and in most cases, can fire you for not following orders.
- Consider that others use the bathroom after you and appreciate cleanliness.

Simple things like this must be taught. I've worked with clients to provide things like business etiquette training in an employee orientation curriculum, and it's disconcerting to hear some folks' beliefs about what they bring to the job. As we spend a couple of days talking about appearance and behavior on the job, it's wonderful to see the light bulbs going on over people's heads. It's like a whole new discovery of what's important! We role play and discuss the ways in which our behavior affects others and why most of what we do and how we look has to do with respect for our coworkers and our supervisors. I'm sure it comes as no surprise to any reading this that such things would have to be part of a training initiative of some kind. It's how things are today.

We teach, and then we must reinforce. Senior leadership must model respectful behavior. It's best when there is a clear mandate in the company that certain values will be exhibited. If everyone knows how to act like an adult, we can create healthy workplaces full of mature people. We want folks to act like professionals. Sometimes we just have to teach them and then *show* them how professionals behave. We have to send a message that not behaving like professionals can mean losing a job.

When I was a facility manager, one of my employees, known for her bad temper and abrasive communication, once rudely reprimanded a consultant with a raised voice and a tone that dripped with arrogance. I pulled her into a conference room and told her that if I ever heard her speak to so much as the pizza delivery guy in that tone of voice, I'd terminate her on the spot. She got it—and went out and apologized to the consultant. That was the kind of acknowledgment of her behavior I was looking for. That's professionalism.

### **Bad Behavior Costs the Company Money, and Here's How**

A book published a couple of years ago by management professors Christine Pearson and Christine Porath, *The Cost of Bad Behavior*, outlines some specific ways to calculate financial losses due to incivility. They essentially boil down to this:

- Calculate the percentage of employees who will experience incivility based upon some investigation, and multiply it by the total number of employees.
- Calculate the costs of various losses based upon hours worked annually, productivity as annualized revenue per employee, and the number of hours lost because of an uncivil interaction.
- Add in estimated costs for things such as stress or health care costs, legal costs, the cost of dealing with the incivility by HR and others, absenteeism, etc.

The authors include some detail of companies with whom they've worked. Cisco, for example, calculated their losses with the following formula, after they had worked with HR to put some percentages to the kinds of complaints and effects seen in the workforce:

- (a) How likely is it that an employee will experience incivility from another employee? (percentage)
- (b) How many employees in the organization?
- (c) How many employees will experience incivility in a year? (a x b)

Then, use “C” to figure the effects of reactions such as these:

- The number of employees who will lose work time worrying about the incident and future interactions with the offender (c x 53%)
- The number of work hours lost while employees try to avoid their offender (c x 28%)
- The number of employees whose commitment to the organization will decrease (c x 37%)
- The number of employees who will intentionally reduce their work output (c x 22%)
- The number of employees who will think about changing jobs (c x 46%)
- The number of employees who will leave (c x 12%)

The percentages must be calculated for each organization, of course, because they will be different in each company. It takes time to pull together the probabilities because it takes some investigation and thought to how people react to being treated rudely. I remember well how demoralized and burnt out I felt after my building project. I pushed a lot of work onto coworkers and found I could not work up the excitement for my job I once had. I can only describe what I experienced as some form of post traumatic stress disorder. For a while, I could barely handle receiving a building complaint such as a toilet not flushing properly. It would send me to the moon. I'd have to go outside and take a walk to keep myself from actually walking off the job for good.

Here is what Cisco calculated as its costs associated with workplace incivility: with 49,000 employees, they began with a very low 1 percent of employees—**490**—who would experience workplace incivility. Estimating lost productivity in this exceptionally civil company with an extremely positive environment, their research resulted in the following assumptions:

- 260 people [of the 490] would lose time stewing about the event (53%)
- 182 would experience a weakened commitment to the company (37%)
- 59 would change jobs (12%)

and so on.

Cisco's estimation of yearly loss due to uncivil behavior at work: **\$8 million**.

### **If You Don't Care About Conduct, at Least Care About Lost Revenue**

Eight million dollars a year. This doesn't even factor in the possibility of worker's compensation claims, stress-related healthcare costs, vandalism, and lawsuits due to behavior so valueless that a person feels his or her only recourse is to take someone to court. I know of a company where a vice president drank too much at the company's annual convention for its clients and made openly suggestive and borderline obscene comments to the women at his banquet table. It was said he nearly danced on the table. Later on, it was discovered that he and a Help Desk employee sat in the employee's car in the parking lot and took drugs on a fairly routine basis. It was the drug activity for which he was fired. What if one of the clients or coworkers had sued the company for his behavior at the banquet? What if one of the clients had pulled a lucrative account? What if, while the vice president was on drugs, he made a horrific miscalculation or unintentionally harmed a coworker?

When I was a facility manager, one of our employees took to performing a scandalous and disgusting form of venting every other evening in one of the men's bathrooms. It took us some time to catch him, but when he was terminated, he did not say a word. He simply walked out of the room and left the building, and many of us who had been working for months to find out who he was felt we had completed a project. It only takes one employee with a leaning toward some serious mental stability issues to cause a tremendous amount of time to be spent by various departments to be expended.

That is time lost doing work that really means something to a company. The authors of *The Cost of Bad Behavior* say that Fortune 1000 executives spend an average time of 7 weeks per year resolving employee conflicts. Seven *weeks* of an executive's salary. That's nothing to sneeze at. The most telling facts, the ones that should give any business owner pause, are that the majority of targeted individuals will find a way to get back at their offenders, and almost as many decide to find some way to get back at the company. That's what costs so much—all the time spent managing the results of foolish, uncivil, disrespectful, clueless, boneheaded behavior.

### **There's Just No Excuse for Shoveling Money Out the Door**

I wrote in my newsletter at the beginning of the year of a case involving the Brooklyn DA's office, in which the lead prosecutor coerced witnesses, threatening them and forcing them to lie to make his case. They weren't witnesses at all, as they hadn't been privy to the crime in question. He then withheld documents from the defense team that would have cast significant doubt on the accused man's guilt. Nevertheless, he won his case, and the victim was sent to prison for 15 years. It was 15 years of painstaking legal work as the jailed man gave himself an education and researched his own case. The end result was that his conviction was overturned and he walked out of prison last year. But he is bringing a lawsuit of \$60 million against the State of New York and will most certainly win, as the facts are clearly in his favor. What's astonishing is that the lead prosecutor is still on the job, and the district attorney defends him vigorously.

What did it take for employees and coworkers on the job with that lead prosecutor to remain silent? I will bet that his behavior was the same toward his colleagues as it was his badgered witnesses. I will bet that people feared him and the district attorney. I'll be looking for the exposé article in *Vanity Fair* (or some other magazine) in which we find out that people hated working with the offender, and they hated their jobs and feared speaking out lest they lose said jobs. This is workplace incivility at its most egregious, and it is not so uncommon as to be shocking to any of us. Here's the thing: not only will the state have to pay millions of dollars to the victim, but the Brooklyn DA's office is now covered with the stink of one man's unethical behavior and his boss' collusion. Think of the number of cases that will now be reopened due to his violations!

Money is being shoveled out the door by so many organizations who think stuff like this is simply not important. It is vitally important. One lawsuit can bring a company down. Repeated unethical and uncivil behavior can ruin reputations and a company's brand, and it can take years to get back in the game—assuming employees can be found who will work there.

### **Keeping Your Cool in the Heat of Incivility**

I won't insult you by giving you a set of fairly worthless steps to combating bad behavior in the workplace. The truth is that most companies don't have civility initiatives, and quite often, no matter what their written statements or promotional material indicating the values they cherish, they are often nothing more than window dressing. Organizations know they need to attract talent, so they'll look as pretty as they can. It's when we get inside and walk around for a while that we find out whether or not a place has the guts to do what's right.

The first thing we must do in order to deal with every day incivility is to step back and assess the big picture. We are valuable when we can get along with all kinds of people, and employees in any institution pretty much represent the whole world. You've got introverts, extroverts, loudmouths, quiet-like-mice, go-alongers, backstabbers, clowns, overachievers, slackers—the list goes on and on. One of the ways you can help yourself is to recognize that we all bring strengths to the job but we have to live with other folks' weaknesses.

Some people simply do not know how to act. They may not be intentionally rude or backwards in the manners department; it's possible they are oblivious to their faults and ignorant of the effect they have on others. In this case, we need large doses of good old-fashioned forgiveness. We have to be able to take a deep breath and remember that some people don't see what they're doing. We have to decide if we've got the ability to tell them how we feel about their behavior. In many cases, this can be enough. One of my employees in my facility management days who was prone to avoiding confrontation forced himself to tell me how much it bothered him that I did or said certain things that offended him. I really had not known he felt I was rude. It gave me an opportunity to sincerely apologize and make an effort to show him I wanted to change.

If it's not enough, though, to confront the person who offends and respectfully speak your mind, you must take some standard actions. Begin to keep a log of an offender's behavior. Documentation is a powerful tool. Taking your concerns to your supervisor is key if you feel you'll be taken seriously. If you feel you will *not* be taken seriously, or you *know* it won't because you've attempted it before with no results, taking your concerns to HR is the next step. You must stress the effect the behavior is having on your performance or productivity, and having documentation backs you up.

There are those at work who have some rather serious impairments. They have gotten away with rude and insensitive behavior for a long time because it works for them, and no one has called them on it. People like this can be brought up short, but there must be consequences.

There are also those at work who simply do not care how they affect others. They either see their behavior as a badge of success, believing that nice guys finish last, or they are psychopaths. Research shows that 1% of the general population is psychopathic. What this means is that individuals without conscience are part of our places of business. They do not feel remorse. They can do wrong things to others or to the company without feeling any regret. It's not part of their makeup. These are folks who know the difference between right and wrong, but it has no bearing upon their behavior. They can look like everyone else, act like everyone else, and fit in like everyone else, but they will never feel bad about hurting someone or destroying something or sabotaging anything. They fit the ultimate "It's all about me" profile.

In this case, there are very few strategies you can employ except to avoid. These are not people with whom you can reason, nor are you going to prevail by trying to "beat them at their own game." You will rarely be smart enough or ruthless enough. It is almost impossible for us to believe that someone could walk around without a conscience, and so what we do is say to ourselves, "I must not have heard that correctly. He/she couldn't have meant that." We often doubt ourselves when dealing with a psychopath, because they are highly skilled at turning the tables and making us feel like we're misunderstanding everything. They're also very skilled at flattering and gaining our confidences and appearing to be on our side. Stay away from these people if at all possible. Keep your documentation. Do not engage.

Never, ever agree to help someone conceal suspicious, malicious, or uncivil behavior. If you are ever asked to ignore your own sense of right and wrong, you must refuse. Toxic, dangerous people will pull out all the stops to get you to doubt your instincts. Avoid and document, and seek ways to get your concerns heard.

There are strategies for hanging on in an extremely difficult work environment, and I document them elsewhere. Unfortunately, this paper is not on the subject of survival, but on the costs of ignoring incivility on the job. Let me suggest you search *Fast Company's* archives for articles about

Robert Hare or Martha Stout, who advise on dealing with the most treacherous at work. Search out books and articles on how to be strategic and political in bringing concerns or complaints to your supervisor or to HR.

### **Addressing Bad Behavior as a Performance Issue**

As a supervisor, you have more power in this regard as it relates to your employees. When you interview, you can be very clear that part of your performance evaluation is based upon respectful, civil behavior. Ask interviewees when they've experienced incivility and ask how they handled it. Tell them that you deal with incivility at work and you consider it a fire-able offense. Train and coach in the area of civility, or hire others to do so. Make it standard operating procedure to reinforce positive interactions and discuss unproductive behavior. Jump on incivility when it occurs by immediately addressing it.

Be alert. Keep your eyes open and take notice if people avoid a particular coworker or shut down when he or she takes center stage. Ask questions. Make it clear you don't tolerate poor behavior but then be willing to listen. Pearson and Porath say a fifth of all the offenders they've worked with say neither their bosses nor the companies for which they work seem to care how employees treat one another, and "If no one cares," one offender asked, "why should I make any extra effort [to treat others with respect]?" Lots of people won't do the right thing when no one is watching. Don't be afraid to have a healthy suspicion.

Pearson and Porath note in *The Cost of Bad Behavior* that it is important to take complaints seriously and it is equally important not to make excuses for powerful instigators. Some men and women are terrific talents, but they can wreak havoc, and they will cost you more than they thrill you with their superior abilities. Get rid of them. "He's not really that bad" or "That's just her personality" is not the true leader's way of dealing with such people. Be a leader. I used to tell my employees that half of their performance evaluation was about their work product and half was about how they affected and interacted with the team. I called this "critical interpersonal skills" and considered them even when it wasn't part of my company's performance evaluation process. It is not worth it to have a disruptive, gossiping, negative presence on a great team.

The authors of *Bad Behavior* say that it might be worth it to conduct *post*-departure interviews. Take six months and then contact an employee who has left to see if they will be more forthcoming about why they left, especially if the employee was vague about his or her reasons for going.

If you're in a position to implement some positive change in your company in the area of employee behavior, pick up *The Cost of Bad Behavior* and make it a priority to turn your ship around. Start investigating the reach incivility has in your organization. Start a project that addresses behavior. People want to know their employers care about this issue. You will find a lot of people who will jump on board to make your offices a great place to work.

### **Deciding if it's Time to Leave**

If you've done all you can to work with or around incivility in your company, you have two choices: take it or leave it. If you have addressed it and found no one on your side, you will have to decide whether the level of incivility with which you must deal outweighs your enjoyment of your job or if there are things you can do for yourself to mitigate the irritation of garden variety bad behavior such as constant interruptions, unreturned phone calls, insolent attitudes, and gossip. Focusing on the positives of your specific work and what you receive from it is a place to start.

But when it starts to stress you out and weigh you down; when you start to dread Monday morning beginning mid-afternoon on Sunday; if you are experiencing stress-related illnesses and you know it has to do with work; if you drag yourself reluctantly into work every morning; if you can



barely make it through a day; if you call out more than you know is right; if you *hate your job* because of the nasty people with whom you must share oxygen, then be honest with yourself. It's time to go. There is no reason to keep pushing if you have an opportunity to begin searching for work elsewhere. Make plans. Start networking. Shake off the nothing-will-ever-change and I'm-stuck-here mentality and begin looking for your exit. No job is worth your sanity or your health. Having conducted extensive research into the effects of incivility on the job, Pearson and Porath present findings that are shocking but not really surprising:

- Statistics from surveys gathered nationally indicated 96% of workers experience incivility at work
- 80% of employees surveyed believe they get no respect at work
- 94% of workers treated uncivilly get even with their offenders
- 88% get even with their organizations
- Only 9% report uncivil treatment to HR or an EAP
- 12% leave jobs due to incivility in the workplace
- 60% experience stress due to workplace incivility
- 48% claim they experience incivility at work at least once per week.

It's time to recognize that conduct unbecoming to a professional and respectful workplace costs money and drives valuable employees away. We can turn things around if we take civility seriously and make it clear we will not tolerate incivility. We can make civil behavior a part of performance evaluations and inculcate it into company culture. It not only saves money; it's the right thing to do.