

Empowering Employees to Combat Incivility: Building a Culture of Respect Together

How confident are you as an employee in curbing workplace incivility?

When answering this question, consider how you rated your ability to protect yourself or others from incivility. Deterring workplace incivility is not just a leadership issue. It is a shared responsibility requiring all employees to set boundaries and be accountable for their behaviour.

Though employers set expectations and safe and respectful workplace policies to promote and foster respectful, safe and inclusive workplaces, employees should be educated, encouraged and coached on confronting rudeness professionally and psychologically safely.

Employees should be challenged to take responsibility when confronted and informed that their behaviour has been perceived as rude without being defensive, annoyed or aggressive. They should learn that unintentional behaviours may be perceived as rudeness. For example, two parties on a team call message each other while a third party is talking. This causes distraction and is viewed as disrespect. Regardless of the intention, the two messaging parties should own their behaviour, not defend it, and apologize if confronted.

Reducing workplace incivility begins with every employee committing to increase their self-awareness and be open to the possibility that their behaviour could be perceived as rude and disrespectful, regardless of their intentions.

I teach “The Fuzzy Line of Rudeness,” a program involving micro-training and a six-week challenge to increase self-awareness by tapping into the Reticular Activating System, which is crucial in maintaining alertness and focus.

For example, if you buy a blue car, you may notice similar vehicles that did not catch your attention before, regardless of the brand. Educating employees to pay attention and report rudeness in an anonymous survey, how they responded or if they were rude and how they fixed it can increase self-awareness and personal accountability to stop rudeness and prevent it by correcting their behaviour.

Self-awareness can increase motivation to reflect on one’s behaviours and attitudes and align with the employer’s values. Small actions, like a grumpy voice tone or dismissive body language, can negatively impact another person and be perceived as a sign of disrespect. Embracing self-assessment can lead to personal growth and maturity and increase the opportunity to be an upstander and role model for civility and respectful behaviour.

Employees can develop intrapersonal (e.g., [emotional regulation](#)) and interpersonal conflict resolution skills to confront rude behaviours without escalation by training and role-modelling peers. For example, developing assertive communication skills to set and communicate boundaries around rude behaviour can help protect them from stress caused by chronic

exposure to rudeness. These skills also help them be more open to constructive feedback when their behaviour is questioned or challenged as rude.

Employees and teams that promote and buy into a culture of civility cultivate strong, positive relationships with peers, teams and leaders. Civility among teams fosters trust, creates space for tolerating mistakes (e.g., a peer having a bad day) and promotes positive social connections, encouraging inclusion and reducing isolation and loneliness.

Employees can promote civility with micro-behaviours, such as small gestures of gratitude, offering a teammate help, saying thank you and recognizing a peer's good work, which build and reinforce a culture of respect.

An employee may sometimes feel overwhelmed by incivility, regardless of the employer's efforts to promote civility. When they are stressed and incivility persists or escalates beyond their control, their training and leadership should remind them they are not alone and that support is available for the asking.

The key lesson is that seeking support is advisable, and it is a protective behaviour to stop exposure to incivility. Human resources partners, direct leaders, trusted peers and workplace mental health resources can guide and assist employees in navigating difficult situations.

Leaders and employees can encourage employees to seek help without stigma or fear of judgment if they feel unsafe. In a psychologically safe workplace, it is critical to talk about incivility, have training for employees and [crisis-ready](#) resources ready to support, protect and help employees normalize experiences and concerns to ensure no one feels isolated and protect those exposed to chronic acts of incivility from mental harm.

Preventing workplace incivility is not just a responsibility. It's an opportunity for growth, connection and shared success. When employees confront rudeness respectfully and openly, they foster a culture of accountability and kindness. Being receptive when their behaviour is questioned allows individuals to grow, learn and align their actions with the shared values of civility and respect.

Accepting that no one is perfect opens the door to self-awareness, humility and meaningful connections with colleagues. By owning mistakes and committing to improvement, employees demonstrate maturity and help create a supportive workplace where trust can flourish. The benefits are profound: stronger relationships, reduced stress, improved morale and a collective sense of belonging.

Employees and leaders can transform the workplace into a space where respect and psychological safety thrive, fostering individual well-being and team and employer performance results. Choosing civility is more than just stopping incivility. It's a proactive commitment to building a workplace that empowers everyone to do their best and feel their best.

Civility's ripple effects are foundational for positive employee experiences. Civility does not need to be complicated. It starts with employees' and leaders' willingness to act, learn and lead by example.