

Incivility Through an Intersectional Lens: Unique Challenges and Coaching Tips for Workers with Disabilities

Workplace incivility is often discussed as a universal experience, but the reality is far more complex. For employers, it's essential to understand that not all employees encounter incivility in the same way. Factors such as disability whether visible or invisible can significantly shape how individuals experience and are affected by rude or disrespectful behaviors.

Employees with disabilities frequently face unique challenges that amplify the impact of incivility. These challenges may stem from physical, sensory, or cognitive differences, but also from less visible conditions such as chronic illness, mental health concerns, or neurodiversity. When incivility intersects with bias, stigma, or assumptions about capability, it can create environments where some workers are more vulnerable to exclusion, control, or harm.

My research, conducted through workplace assessments and focus group studies designed to understand employees' experiences, consistently shows that workers with disabilities often have different and less optimal employee experiences compared to those without disabilities. These employees may encounter microaggressions, skepticism about their abilities, or barriers to full participation that others do not face. This heightened vulnerability means that the consequences of incivility can result in feeling less valued and respected than their peers without disabilities.

For organizations committed to psychological safety and inclusion, recognizing these differences is not just a matter of fairness, it is essential for creating a psychologically safe workplace for all. By understanding and addressing the distinct risks faced by workers with disabilities, employers can build more equitable and respectful workplaces where every employee can feel valued and respected.

Understanding Intersectionality in Incivility

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals have multiple overlapping identities that shape their experiences. For workers with disabilities, incivility may not just be about a single rude act, it can be compounded by underlying biases, stereotypes, or perceptions of weakness. These factors can manifest in subtle ways: dismissive comments, exclusion from meetings, ignoring requests for accommodation, or questioning the legitimacy of invisible disabilities such as chronic pain or mental health conditions.

The Power Dynamics of Perceived Weakness

When disability is seen as a weakness, it can create opportunities for others to exert control whether intentionally or not. For example, a manager may overlook a disabled employee's input, or colleagues may make decisions without consulting them. Such acts, even if low intensity can trigger feeling of disrespect, erode trust and reinforce feelings of isolation.

Invisible disabilities are often misunderstood, leading to skepticism or minimization of the employee's experience.

Bias and Barriers to Inclusion

Bias conscious or unconscious can shape how incivility is expressed and experienced. Workers with disabilities may be more likely to be targets of microaggressions, patronizing attitudes, or exclusionary practices. These behaviors not only undermine psychological safety but also perpetuate a culture where difference is seen as a liability rather than a strength.

Creating Safe and Respectful Workplaces for All

Addressing incivility through an intersectional lens means recognizing that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is insufficient. Employers and leaders must actively challenge biases, educate teams about visible and invisible disabilities, and foster environments where all employees feel valued and respected. This includes providing training on disability awareness and inclusion, encouraging open dialogue about accommodation and support needs, and promoting upstander behaviors where colleagues intervene or support those experiencing incivility.

Empowering Employees with Disabilities

Employees with disabilities should be empowered to speak up about incivility without fear of retaliation or judgment. Organizations can support this by offering confidential reporting channels, peer support networks, and access to mental health resources. Leaders must model inclusive behaviors and respond promptly to concerns, reinforcing that civility is a shared responsibility.

Five Coaching Tips to Protect Workers with Disabilities from Incivility

1. Normalize and Encourage Disclosure with Safety- Create a culture where employees feel safe to disclose disabilities (visible or invisible) without fear of skepticism, bias, or retaliation. Leaders and coaches should explicitly state that all disclosures are met with respect and confidentiality, validate every disclosure with empathy, and reinforce that accommodation is a right, not a burden.

2. Coach Self-Advocacy and Boundary Setting- Empower employees to communicate their needs and boundaries assertively. Practice scripts for requesting accommodations or addressing incivility, role-play scenarios for speaking up about disrespect or exclusion, and reinforcing that self-advocacy is a strength, not a weakness.

3. Educate Teams on Disability Awareness and Intersectionality- Provide regular training for all staff on disability inclusion, intersectionality, and civility. Address both visible and invisible disabilities, debunk myths and stereotypes, and teach micro-skills for upstander behavior—how to intervene or support colleagues experiencing incivility.

4. Model and Reinforce Inclusive Communication- Leaders and coaches should consistently model respectful, nonjudgmental communication. Stick to observations, not labels, when discussing performance or behavior. Lead with curiosity and empathy, document interactions with integrity and confidentiality, and follow up to ensure issues are resolved.

5. Establish and Promote Accessible Reporting and Support Channels- Ensure that employees know how to report incivility or request help, and that these channels are accessible and confidential. Walk employees through the reporting process and available support, encourage use of anonymous hotlines or online systems if needed, and follow up after incidents to check on well-being and ensure resolution.

Workplace incivility is not experienced equally. By viewing it through an intersectional lens and applying targeted coaching strategies, organizations can better understand the unique vulnerabilities faced by workers with disabilities and take meaningful steps to create truly inclusive, respectful workplaces. When every employee regardless of ability feels safe, valued, and empowered, the entire organization benefits.