

Leading the Charge Against Incivility: Employers' Guide to Cultivating Respectful Workplaces

Every CEO and senior leader makes decisions daily—consciously or unconsciously—that define what the workforce believes they think and care about civility. Incivility can negatively impact a workforce when tolerated and not confronted.

Mitigating incivility requires leadership to set standards and role model civility through collective daily interactions. Leaders foster an inclusive culture where all employees feel psychologically safe and valued by role-modelling respectful behaviour in the good and challenging times.

Preventing and addressing incivility is a shared responsibility among all employees and leaders. Leaders, in particular, play a crucial role by setting clear expectations and proactively confronting and correcting acts of incivility, leveraging their authority and position to foster a respectful workplace.

Employees can take accountability for how they show up daily, own their behavior when confronted about being rude, and be advocates for addressing acts of incivility that happen to themselves or others.

Psychological safety promotes leaders' role as a protective factor and agents to create cultural change and shaping. Leaders shape workplace norms through their words and actions, influencing the tone and culture in which employees operate. Leaders who role model and talk regularly about the benefits and expectations for all employees to demonstrate respectful behaviour reinforce the employers' values and standards of excellence.

Effective leaders address incivility promptly and in a non-threatening manner through the lens of accountability and learning. Whether uncivil behaviours occur in meetings, emails, or casual conversations, swift action demonstrates good behaviour and shows how rude behaviour is unacceptable. It sets the expectation for stopping undesired actions and starting desired behaviours.

Leaders need to confront instances of incivility calmly, clearly, fairly and with a determination to resolve them, ensuring that all team members feel supported and valued. They must accept that employees will make mistakes and create opportunities to learn and move forward.

Employers should create a framework to shape civility and set expectations to mitigate the risk of workplace incivility. This can start with onboarding and educating new workers on the organization's values and providing all employees with respectful and safe training on civility expectations. A developmental program can help employees improve their intrapersonal (e.g., EQ training) and interpersonal (e.g., assertiveness, communication, conflict resolution) skills to better advocate for themselves and others when addressing acts of workplace incivility.

Practical support training that teaches micro-skills such as active listening, giving and receiving constructive feedback and emotional literacy can equip employees to confidently navigate challenging interpersonal interactions like incivility. One helpful training modality is leveraging self-awareness training and civility challenges, as well as scenario-based training, allowing employees to explore options to confront incivility.

Regardless of the training, it is beneficial to build program evaluation, design learning that promotes ongoing feedback and measurement and check in on how employees are experiencing incivility to determine how effectively civility initiatives are working. Employers are encouraged to promote civility within workplace mental health programs to promote a caring and inclusive culture.

Cultivating a caring and inclusive workplace culture is foundational for combatting incivility. Not assuming all employees think the same or have the same standards of what is rude contributes to a respectful and safe workplace policy.

Leaders should reinforce and encourage acceptable behaviour and expectations that hold employees accountable for their behaviour. Employers benefit from regularly articulating expectations on civility through policy, training, staff meetings, reviewing employer values, random pulse checks, and focus groups to check in on employees' experience. This approach demonstrates that the employer cares, is committed, and focuses on excellence, not a check-the-box exercise.

Employers can shape civility by creating experiences such as social gatherings, team-building activities and recognition programs to help employees understand they are a part of something bigger than themselves. This can give them purpose and help them understand that their behaviours matter to their team's and organization's success.

Employers can make it safe for employees to share concerns confidentially without fear of retaliation by creating anonymous reporting platforms or designating HR representatives to handle concerns discreetly. Employers demonstrate to their workforces that every employee's experience and voice matter by addressing feedback constructively and transparently. They can adopt pulse checks to monitor if their interventions are stopping incivility.

Preventing and confronting incivility is a shared responsibility between employees and leaders. Senior leaders are the champions who set the expectation as to why, what and how civility will help the organization win and thrive to its potential by creating a respectful culture. A culture of civility fosters lower disability claims, absenteeism and turnover rates and higher productivity. Employees who feel respected and supported come to work without fear and do their best work.

Motivated employers may have challenges combatting incivility. It is a complex issue because rudeness is subjective. I refer to the "fuzzy line of rudeness" because two people in the same situation may have different perceptions of what they experienced.

Employers are advised to understand that employees have different expectations and should be encouraged to speak up when disrespected. Intention does not matter. What matters is an opportunity for learning, accountability and growth.

Workplace incivility is not a simple issue to solve. It demands action by employers, leaders and employees. A respectful workplace isn't built on superficial efforts or checkbox policies. It requires a commitment to civility by promoting accountability and setting expectations on what good is.

Employers must embrace a structured Plan-Do-Check-Act approach to prevent and address incivility. This begins by setting clear expectations, implementing a respectful and safe policy and meaningful training programs, and consistently evaluating their impact.

Workplace incivility should be a core consideration within any mental health or psychological safety initiative. When civility is prioritized as part of these programs, it mitigates the risks of mental harm and fosters a culture of inclusion and mutual respect. Employers who lead by example, openly advocate for civility, and provide tools for employees to address and learn from incidents of rudeness create safe, healthy and productive workplaces.

Combatting incivility is about building workplaces where employees feel valued and respected. Employers who champion this cause demonstrate their commitment to their people and their vision for excellence.