

Fostering Civility at Work

Every day, leaders in organizations around the world are called on to lead by example. In good times employees look to their leaders to acknowledge success and inspire future performance. In tough times leaders are the ones who must provide a calming force and a steady path. In today's contentious society it is more important than ever that leaders use their power of influence to exude calmness, thoughtfulness, and civility in the workplace.



Where Are We Falling Short?

We don't need to cast a very wide net to find evidence of incivility in society today. Traditional bastions of civility such as schools, churches, offices, and public venues are becoming more and more hostile. The tones of conversations tend to be more accusatory than conciliatory. In many situations, people no longer seek to understand each other; the priority is to "win" every point. Discussions are no longer thoughtful, but begin instantly as argumentative.

Social media has also enabled people to anonymously communicate in ways that were never before acceptable. Foul language, accusations, and verbal attacks are the norm, even from friends, family and those we would normally hold in high regard.

Incivility has become habitual. We don't even know we're

being inconsiderate or disrespectful, because "everyone is doing it" and we've become deaf to our tone and attitudes towards others. It has become a vicious cycle: we are rude in our conversations which in turn reduces our perceived value of those we communicate with. And because our perceived value of others is diminished, we are more prone to incivility and disrespect.

How Can Leaders Shift the Paradigm?

Leaders have the unique ability to influence the conversations around them simply by holding themselves and those around them to a higher standard. Here are some ideas for improving your workplace culture:

Change the Conversation – Directly change the topic when a volatile topic is introduced into a conversation. Let employees know that attacks on personal beliefs and opinions are not appropriate discussions for the workplace.

Set the Tone – Use a tone of voice that is calm, firm, accepting, and respectful. No shouting, no accusing, not condescending. Make sure others know that only respectful discourse is acceptable at work.

Model active listening – One of the biggest contributors to incivility is a lack of listening. When someone is speaking, our minds tend to run toward how we are going to respond, what we are going to add, or how we are going to refute their statements. Set an example of thoroughly listening before responding, and then acknowledging the



value of that person’s ideas and opinions. Only offer alternate points of view, comments and additional perspective after you know the other person feels heard and valued.

Evaluate your social media presence – Social media is a hotbed for incivility. Those who use social media have very little accountability due to virtual distance and anonymity. Just because they can’t see others’ reactions doesn’t mean that others are not adversely affected by rants, accusations, attacks and divisiveness. Delicate

“The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example.”
– John Wooden



and complex topics cannot be resolved in 256 characters. How do you use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.? All employees should know that no matter WHY they use social media, their posts represent not only themselves, but those they work with and for as well.

Encourage appreciation for diversity – Mixing things up on a regular basis can be a great tool to help employees see things from another perspective. Ideas can

PAS offers live onsite and web-based training to address the unique needs of leaders and employees in the workplace. A few of PAS’ training topics include:

- Effective Communication
- Communicating Assertively with Others
- Dealing with Difficult People
- Workplace Diversity
- Building Trust
- Respectful Interactions
- Talking and Listening at Work
- Workplace Conflict Management and De-escalation
- Listen SMART
- Social Media Boundaries



include rotating visits to different departments, staff meetings encouraging reports from new contributors, creating workgroups made up of different divisions, etc.

Recognize civility – Acknowledge employees who are doing things right. Encourage more of the same. Recognition can be effective whether done publicly or privately. Private support encourages good behavior to continue, and public appreciation lets others know what behaviors you respect.

Acknowledge the Elephant in the Room

For leaders, sometimes a direct approach is the best approach. If your team struggles with considerate communication, call a meeting to discuss the standards of civility in your workplace. Review the policies and guidelines set by your organization so employees cannot claim ignorance of the issue. Celebrate successes, identify areas for improvement, and set goals for future behavior. Handle the topic of “civility” as you would any other part of a business plan, and it will become part of the overall culture of your company.

Contact PAS to arrange onsite or web-based training on these and other topics related to employee productivity and communication, or to obtain guidance from an organizational psychologist on workplace communication and enhancing a culture of respect.

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