Rudeness and Incivility in the Workplace

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Rudeness and incivility among employees are common throughout the business world. With the emphasis on profits and controlling labor costs, there are many issues evolving from the lack of civility within the workplace. This paper will provide examples of rudeness and incivility along with possible causes and performance problems. Significant attention will be given to the control and management of rudeness and incivility from both a personal and organizational point of view.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone would like to work in an environment where they are treated with respect and professionalism. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the "civil" work environment is the exception rather than the norm. What is "incivility?" The Oxford Dictionary defines incivility as "a rude or discourteous act; to act rudely is to be discourteous without regard for others in violation of norms for respect in social interactions." The workplace norms are the norms of the community consisting of basic moral standards that have developed over time and are usually prescribed through formal and informal organizational policies, rules, and procedures (Brooks, et al.).

Typical words used to describe rudeness and incivility include such terms as being crude, inelegant, uncouth, coarse, vulgar, discourteous, unlearned, uncivilized, ignorant, uneducated, and simple. Examples of uncivil and rude behavior in the workplace include a person who takes someone else's food from a shared refrigerator without permission; purposely does not greet or acknowledge someone at the office; starts an e-mail without a salutation; takes the last cup of coffee without making more; stands over a coworker who is on the phone or is typing; does not give credit publicly to a colleague; leaves the copier knowingly jammed and walks away; interrupts a person speaking to someone else; shouts at a coworker or superior; arrives late; or wears clothing that is inappropriate for the work environment.

INCREASING RUDENESS AND INCIVILITY

Most employees when surveyed suggest that workplace rudeness and incivility are not only current problems but are problems that are getting worse. For instance, a survey of 1,100 public sector employees was typical of the conclusions in the published literature on incivility and rudeness (Elias, 2001). Seventy-one percent of the respondents indicated that they had experienced workplace incivility within the previous five years. One-third of these incidents were caused by supervisors (Elias, 2001). In a similar study, 53 percent of employees lost work time worrying about the incident or future interactions, while 46 percent contemplated changing jobs and reduced their overall commitment to the organization (Azulay, 2007). Of particular interest to this discussion is that employees in surveys by Azulay (2007), Park (2002), Wickham (1999) indicated that their boss was the primary instigator of the rude behavior. Since most bosses tend to be males, it is not surprising that 70 percent of the reported instigators of incivility were males (Wickham, 1999). In fact, according to Wickham (1999), males were seven times more likely to instigate uncivil behavior toward lower status individuals. These conclusions regarding gender and incivility are consistent with those presented by Dainow (2001) who suggests that women are more likely to experience workplace incivility than men and the lower the status of the employee within the hierarchy, the more likely the person was to be a victim of rudeness. It has also been found that the negative effects of incivility (e.g., job dissatisfaction and job withdrawal) are equal for both men and women (Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001).

Rudeness and incivility have a negative effect on an organization's ability to provide services. Surveys such as one conducted by the University of Michigan suggest that customer satisfaction with American businesses is not very good (Trigaux, 2002). The University's study concluded that 75 percent of Americans have encountered rudeness in the workplace. However, companies have a tendency to ignore this problem (Waggoner, 1998). It is not surprising that victims of rudeness and incivility are more likely to retaliate against the employer rather than the tormenter (Waggoner, 1998). After all, the tormenter could be their boss. Considering the many forms of workplace abuse that exist, rudeness is at the low end of the workplace abuse ladder. This is because rudeness and incivility tend to fall short of forbidden behaviors such as discrimination and harassment. There is evidence, however, to suggest that this may change someday. Kranz (2007) reports that 64 percent of individuals surveyed believed that employees ought to be able to sue for rudeness and recover damages.

There is general agreement that there has been an increase in rudeness and incivility. However, there is less concurrence as to the reasons for the increase. Most experts suggest a combination of individual, family and organizational factors that contribute to this increase. For instance, it has been suggested that today's workers are simply stressed out (Associated Content, 2006). Employees are stressed because they are often asked to do more work and are usually provided with less assistance from management. The workplace has also become more diverse. Workers from various backgrounds may react differently to situations. Behaviors that one person may perceive as being "cold" or "rude" may be viewed differently by another individual. In other words, there is also an element of subjectivity to the perception of rudeness, just as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.

The increase in rudeness and incivility may be traced to the family and the effect of technology, such as television and the Internet (RudeBusters, 2007). It has been suggested that in our technologically focused society, we are more competent when dealing with machines and

software but have lost ground when it comes to dealing with each other (Westaff, 2007). Rudeness may pay off since the rude individual at work is three times more likely to be in a higher position than the target of the rudeness (RudeBusters, 2007). After all, while many have indicated that it seems logical that rude behavior affects the bottom line (e.g., Schieber, 2002; Southam, 2007), it is difficult to specifically determine the extent. The success or failure of a company is much more likely to be controlled by a multitude of complex factors.

As previously mentioned, today's worker is stressed out and is being asked to do more but is given less job security and overall support. So why is there more rudeness? Research on employee job satisfaction seems to be inconsistent. For example, according to a 2007 Job Satisfaction Survey Report released by the Society for Human Resource Management, eight out of ten employees reported overall satisfaction with their current positions. However, other studies have concluded job satisfaction has declined in America among all ages and income levels. In a survey of 5,000 workers by TNS, a leading market information company, only 14 percent of workers indicated they were "very satisfied" with their jobs and approximately one-quarter of the American workforce seems to simply show up to collect a paycheck (The Conference Board, 2005). "Rapid technological changes, rising productivity demands and changing employee expectations have all contributed to the decline in job satisfaction," according to the Director of The Conference Board's Consumer Research Center (The Conference Board, 2005). The largest decline in overall job satisfaction during the past decade occurred among the 35-44 age group (a decline from 60.9 to 49.2 percent) and the second largest decline was among workers aged 45-54 (from 57.3 to 47.7 percent). Results from a supplemental TNS survey concluded that 40 percent of workers feel disconnected from their employers and two out of every three workers do not identify with or feel motivated to drive their employer's business goals (The Conference Board, 2005).

This decline is not unique to American workers. European workers have also reported declining levels of job satisfaction over the last three decades. For example, the number of British workers reporting they were completely satisfied with their jobs has decreased from 23 percent in 1992 to 14 percent in 2001. With the increased disconnect and demands placed on employees, it is no wonder that rudeness and incivility have also been increasing.

EFFECT ON PERFORMANCE

According to Johnson and Indvik (1994), workplace rudeness does not get the same amount of attention as workplace violence or harassment or even open conflict (i.e., fighting). However, rudeness on the job can cost a company millions of dollars annually. As reported by Fritscher-Porter (2003), rudeness can have a direct effect on employee productivity, morale, and absenteeism. There are four ways rudeness may affect employee productivity. Employees tend to:

1. Spend time worrying about the uncivil incident or future interactions with the instigator and waste time trying to avoid the instigator;
2. Deliberately become less committed;
3. Not involve themselves in tasks outside their job specifications and expend less effort to meet responsibilities; and
4. Be less willing to help others, and reduce their contribution to the organization (CIVIL, 2000).

As stated earlier, the boss may not always determine the success or failure of the organization. Workplace rudeness can result in added organizational costs through lawsuits and claims, employee retention problems, productivity problems, and maybe most importantly, workplace rudeness can result in customer service problems ("What's your," 2006). There is a tendency for individuals to treat others as they feel they are treated. The unhappy employee is less likely to provide professional, polite customer service. The bottom line is that it is in management's self-interest to manage and control rudeness in the workplace. Research suggests that the supervisor's role in resolving organizational problems, such as incivility and rudeness, is pivotal. The supervisor is not just the individual who is in charge. Employees tend to use the behavior of their bosses as a model for their own behavior. Therefore, no rudeness management program can minimize the importance of the supervisor. Whether the boss is the instigator or not, he or she is certainly in a position to respond to the situation. Therefore, the remaining sections of our paper will focus on the role of the supervisor and organizational policies in the management of uncivil and rude behavior.

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

The supervisor has two roles to play when it comes to rudeness management. First, the supervisor must ensure that he or she is not the problem and, second, he or she has to manage in a way to minimize rudeness. We agree with the published literature that the process begins with self analysis. As discussed by a U.S. News & World Report poll, even though 89 percent of their respondents suggest that incivility and rudeness are serious problems in their workplace, 99 percent of the respondents indicate that their own behavior was acceptable (Hofmann, 2002). It seems when it comes to rudeness, we all may suffer from some insensitivity to our own behavior. Hornstein (2003) provides five suggestions that supervisors should follow to assist in this process. These are generally as follows:
1. During any and all encounters with employees, make every effort to establish an impersonal, professional, "it's all business" demeanor;
2. In order to praise desired work behaviors and punish less desired ones, develop means for monitoring employees' behavior as much as possible;
3. Be aware and have access to rules for establishing compliance and compensation;
4. Involve employees in the decision-making process; and
5. Ensure that current performance is analyzed and expectations for the future are clear.

The above may be the easy part, particularly if the supervisor is not part of the problem. However, if the supervisor is the problem—the tormenter—he or she may be unaware. The research suggests that this is more likely to be the typical situation. Therefore, the supervisor's self-analysis is crucial. Feedback from employees can be very helpful in this self-analysis process. Supervisors should ensure their employees are given the opportunity to address their concerns either in person one-on-one or anonymously through suggestion boxes. Most employees will welcome an opportunity to avoid problems and minimize misunderstandings. To this end, Fritscher-Porter (2003) provides excellent tips that supervisors could follow when having these "clear the air" discussions with employees. These recommendations include the following:
1. *Attack the problem, not the person.* It is one thing to say the individual was late but it is another thing to say he or she is lazy. Being told one is lazy personalizes the situation and makes focusing on the problem (e.g., being on time) more difficult.

2. *Look for the good in the person who is frustrating you.* No one is all bad; there is goodness in all of us. After all, you did hire the person so at one point in time there must have been a positive perspective toward the employee. This may be a good time to share it.
3. *Do not let the negative individuals get you down.* Unfortunately, there are people who are just never happy. Being unhappy is their "normal"; it is what their life is all about and you can't change that.
4. *Put yourself in the person's shoes.* Try to understand why the person is negative. It never hurts to talk about it; sometimes the problem the person is having is not even work related.
5. *Be as positive as possible.* However, the individual has to understand that the negative behavior will not be tolerated.

THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION

The published research suggests that if organizations take a proactive role to eliminate incivility and rudeness, they can be successful (Azulay, 2007). The people who work in an organization are influenced by the organization's policies and procedures. As discussed by Hornstein (2003), rewards, respect and recognition are key components to any rudeness and incivility management program. The organization must develop a zero-tolerance policy toward incivility and rudeness by creating and maintaining a culture that emphasizes respect among employees. How employees are compensated or rewarded is critical. Favoritism and the lack of a relationship between rewards and performance create mistrust and communicate the absence of concern. Research suggests that an attitude of "you don't care and respect me" leads employees to respond accordingly.

Finally, there are several recommendations that organizations should follow in their efforts to develop and maintain a civil work environment. For instance, Wickham (1999) suggests the following:

- The organization should create a policy on workplace civility.
- Have someone on staff to train all employees on how to solve problems, manage stress, and find non-threatening ways to vent anger and resolve conflict.
- Have a formal mechanism through which employees can report aggressive behaviors and stress the importance of using it.

In addition, Brooks et al. suggest principles that all managers should follow. These are to be on time, discreet, courteous, and concerned about others not just yourself; to dress appropriately; and to use proper written and spoken language. However, in order to achieve the above, it is important that organizations set expectations for how the workplace will operate and what behaviors will be tolerated. These expectations must be defined and communicated and organizations need to make sure the employees have a shared concept of respect. It is also critical that employees are held accountable for any transgressions (CIVIL, 2000). Civility must be taught. The organization should teach civility through conflict resolution training, negotiation and training on dealing with different people, working in teams, stress management, active listening skills, and coaching. In other words, today's company should listen carefully to what is going on around them and when incivility occurs, respond to it. That seems to be the final challenge since many instigators of rudeness are individuals in positions of power.

Downsizing, outsourcing and labor cost control have been common topics in the business world. There seems to be a fundamental change going on in the relationship between the organization and its employees. No longer can the individual anticipate long-term career employment. Technology and international business have resulted in a great deal of job relocation. The typical organization trying to maximize profit and minimize labor costs may be facing an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, organizations want you, the employee, to feel that they want and value you but on the other hand will trade you for the lowest bidder. With job insecurity and technology, we seem to be better at using machines than talking to each other. Therefore, the organization is in trouble.

CONCLUSIONS

There are five basic conclusions from our review of the research concerning incivility and rudeness in the workplace. They are as follows.
1. Rudeness and incivility are problems that are on the increase within the work force.
2. The reasons for the increase vary but we are less friendly toward each other in our fast-paced, technologically-oriented society.
3. Rudeness and incivility have a negative effect on performance and profits.
4. The typical individual seems to have a greater awareness of the behavior of others than of his or her own behaviors.
5. Organizational strategies must focus on those individual and organizational issues in order to manage this problem.

Incivility and rudeness may not be the number one determinant of an organization's success or failure but a positive, friendly work environment is beneficial to everyone. As we become more of a service-focused economy, the ultimate question in the long run may be—*can we all get along*?

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