

Etiquette Crisis at Work By Nicole Jacoby

Employees say they've had enough of incivility, bad manners

NEW YORK (CNN) - Corporate America has a crisis on its hands. And it has workers slamming down phones, sending off snippy e-mails and talking in hushed tones at water coolers.

It's a crisis, say some experts, of etiquette.

"We can't be sure that rudeness is on the rise," said Peter Post, co-author of *The Etiquette Advantage in Business*. "...But whether or not it's increased, people are saying they don't want to take it anymore."

The competitive nature of the current labor market has helped drive this growing intolerance. Workers have fewer reasons to put up with rude behavior when new job opportunities beckon just around the corner.

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P.M. Forni, Johns Hopkins University

"You have so much more opportunity to pick and choose. People aren't scared of changing jobs anymore... and they want to enjoy where they work," said Post.

The types of behavior workers find insufferable are diverse, from employees that brush their teeth in the water fountain to those that harshly upbraid colleagues in the presence of the others.

Even the smallest transgressions can take their toll.

"Pet peeve number one among many employees is when people take someone else's food from the refrigerator," said P.M. Forni, a professor of Italian Literature at Johns Hopkins University and cofounder of the school's Civility Project. "This is so outrageous, it's funny. But we have to take it seriously."

Bitter arguments have erupted on more than one occasion over window shades that are opened and shut without asking, printers that remain empty after they run out of paper and coffee pots that never get refilled.

The issue may seem trite, but bad manners are nothing to dismiss lightly. Not only can rampant incivility lower morale, it may influence a company's bottom line.

"These small indignities and minor cruelties take a toll," said Forni. "They add to the burden of stress and fatigue that is already present in the workplace and they have real consequences on the every day lives of workers."

This is especially true when incivilities involve a fundamental lack of respect, such as eavesdropping, shouting, not acknowledging colleagues in hallways, and making public accusations.

Facing the consequences

These types of transgressions can hurt employers where it counts most, according to a recent study conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School. The study surveyed almost 800 people who had experienced incivility at work.

More than half those surveyed said they lost time worrying about the incident or future interactions with the person who was displaying rude behavior. About 20 percent admitted to decreased efforts and another 10 percent reduced the amount of time spent at work.

"There's definitely a time loss," said Christine Pearson, the Kenan-Flagler management professor who authored the study. "There is less dedication and people stop going that extra mile... employees tend to take out their frustration on the organization, not the instigator."

In addition to lost productivity, an uncivil work atmosphere can make the already difficult task of retaining employees even more challenging.

More than 45 percent of respondents contemplated changing jobs altogether because of incidents of rudeness and 12 percent actually made job changes.

Rudeness takes its toll on employee behavior

- 28% lost work time avoiding the instigator
- 53% lost work time worrying about the incident
- 37% believe commitment to company declined
- 22% decreased effort at work
- 10% decreased amount of time spent at work
- 46% contemplated changing jobs
- 12% changed jobs

Source: Christine Pearson, Kenan-Flagler Business School

"These are pretty significant numbers when you think in terms of the bottom line," said Pearson. "They're losing the people who are the good employees, not the people who have caused the problem."

Office incivility -- if allowed to spiral out of control -- can also have more dire consequences. Although rude behavior will not necessarily escalate into violence, a good number of violent incidents in the workplace do have their roots in these types of unseemly transgressions.

Getting to the root

Workplace incivility originates from many of the same factors that cause rudeness in society at large. Stress is probably one of the biggest catalysts. Ironically, the same pressures making some workers less tolerant of rudeness may be making others more rude.

"People are being asked to produce more with fewer resources. Any time you ask people to do that, you add stress," said Post. And that raises the likelihood of curt comments and bad tempers.

An increased sense of casualness in the workplace may also cause more problems than managers bargained for.

"Sometimes informality breeds rudeness," said Forni. "Maybe companies that are very informal

manage to keep stress levels down. But if it's very informal, workers might not know what their boundaries are."

Inappropriate jokes, flirting, gossiping and similar behaviors can easily spiral out of control in overly casual environments.

Exacerbating the problem

Companies have done little to address office incivility, in part because incidents of extreme rudeness are rarely reported. In many cases, managers may be completely unaware they have a problem on their hands.

"These incidents are definitely not always out in the open," said Pearson. "We found that the targets view the instigators as cunning, that they might choose the setting for this to happen where they know others won't be able to see it."

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that perpetrators of bad behavior are often in a more powerful position than those who have to put up with the behavior. To complicate the matter even further, three-quarter of respondents in Pearson's study described the instigator as good at "kissing up" to superiors and a majority indicated the instigator could be an excellent worker who had a unique, valued talent. Targets may be (legitimately) afraid their complaint could jeopardize their careers or otherwise come back to haunt them.

Even when managers are made aware of the problem, they can make matters worse by inadvertently rewarding trouble-makers by promoting them "out of the way."

Transfers and promotions indicate this type of behavior is acceptable, and that exceptions are made for people with certain skills or status. Even worse, if one employee sees another treating a colleague badly, he or she may start treating that colleague the same way, if nothing is done about it.

"It can really spread," said Pearson.

Working toward a solution

Universal treatment of instigators, regardless of rank or talent, will have to be a part of any successful solution to workplace incivility, as well as a focus on stress reduction, contend experts.

You have to "create a workplace in which unreasonably stressful demands are not placed upon workers. A less stressed worker is less likely to engage in confrontational encounters and uncivil behavior," said Forni.

Managers also need to make proficiency in social skills as important a job requirement as other qualifications. References should be checked thoroughly and some thought should be given to how the applicant might "fit" into the organization's work culture.

Finally, civility training for both old and new employees is a must. Establishing expectations about interpersonal behavior and providing training in listening skills, stress management and conflict resolution may help reduce disrespect in the workplace.

Although few companies have yet begun to address these issues, those tracking the issue are optimistic.

"The future of civility in America needn't be dismal," said Forni. "It isn't true that nice guys finish last -- if they are also smart... I think the new century is going to be a century of connecting. Those (individuals and organizations) that look at others with inherent value will succeed."

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