How to Disarm a Nasty Co-Worker: Use a Smile

Hostile Work Environments Cost Companies in Productivity, Creativity; Using the 'No Venting' Rule by Rachel Feinzeig

Companies may be reluctant to admit their offices are anything less than pleasant, but incivility—think belittling barbs or gruff responses—can lead to lost productivity, creativity and talent. As employees who are forced to do more work with fewer resources become more stressed, the rudeness is ramping up. So firms are urging staffers to play nice.

Uncivil behavior can "spread like a virus across teams," says Elizabeth Holloway, a professor of psychology at Antioch University and civility consultant.

Some 96% of workers say they have experienced uncivil behavior and 98% have witnessed it, according to a continuing study by Georgetown University and Thunderbird School of Global Management of nearly 3,000 participants.

Meanwhile, 25% of workers surveyed in a 1998 study said that they were treated rudely at least once a week, but a separate 2011 study showed that 50% of workers felt they were treated rudely at least once a week.

At the National Security Agency, an intelligence analyst invited workers to adorn a desktop metal tree—the "civilitree"—with the names of kind co-workers as part of a yearlong agency effort to bring more warmth to the U.S. government workplace. Meanwhile, managers encouraged workers to pay someone a compliment or show up early for a meeting, by sprinkling "challenge cards" across the cafeteria and in the restrooms. Employees who did good deeds were honored as "civility stars," rewarded with plaques and, in one instance, extra time off—all in the name of increased cordiality among colleagues, according to the NSA's director of equal employment opportunity and diversity.

Even Dish Network Corp., DISH +0.43% which topped financial-news website 24/7 Wall St.'s list of "the worst companies to work for" based on employee feedback, is trying to take a kinder, gentler approach.

Chief Executive Joseph Clayton, who took the helm of the satellite-television company in 2011, says he has been pushing to lighten the mood at the firm's Denver offices.

That has meant summertime concerts for employees and their families and a softened stance toward the company's attendance policy. The company no longer requires workers to scan in by fingerprint and gives managers more discretion to allow a parent to leave to take a child to preschool, for example.

"I wanted it to be a more fun place to work," Mr. Clayton says. "I think people have a responsibility to treat everybody else the way they want to be treated."

He is quick to note that the new policies don't change Dish's core priorities, which include "winning" and "being incredibly driven."

But the changes are a long way from the warm-and-fuzzy corporate culture of Southwest Airlines Co., LUV -0.23% where an entire department is devoted to sending employees supportive notes when a family member is ill or congratulations when they have a baby. "We have people here who remember our birthdays when our family members don't," says Ellen Torbert, the company's vice president of diversity and inclusion.

And if workplaces become sullen and demoralizing? Workers in toxic environments have difficulty concentrating and processing information, says Christine Porath, who studies incivility at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business.

Victims of incivility dial back their work effort and are more likely to lash out, Ms. Porath says. And the costs can be steep: Networking-equipment company Cisco Systems Inc. in 2007 estimated the cost of incivility in its organization topped $8.3 million annually, Ms. Porath says. That figure takes into account turnover, employees' weakened commitment to the company and work time that was lost to worrying about future bad behavior.

John S. Dykes

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Some organizations are setting rules to foster friendliness. At Louisiana's Ochsner Health System, employees are required to follow the "10/5 rule," making eye contact with anyone within 10 feet and greeting anyone within five feet.

There is also a "no venting" rule; a nurse upset about a missing chart or a doctor having difficulty with the computer system has to retreat to a "safe zone"—such as a private nursing-manager's office—to express frustration, says Kara Greer, the health system's vice president of talent management. Employee evaluations take into consideration whether workers follow the procedure.

"It's not necessarily costing us a ton of money," Ms. Greer said of the rules, which all new hires are trained in. "There is not a lot of complexity around what we're looking for."

Employees who have been on the receiving end of workplace incivility say it was a major factor in their decision to seek work elsewhere. A July survey of 1,000 people from public-relations firm Weber Shandwick found that 26% of respondents had quit a job because of an uncivil workplace.

Not all managers believe capitalism and kindness go together. Ray Dalio, the founder of hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, implores his staff to swiftly fire people if they aren't a good fit for the firm and

extols "accurate criticisms" as more valuable than compliments, according to a document which outlines his life and management principles, available on the Bridgewater website. The firm didn't respond to requests for comment.

"It is your job as a manager to get at truth and excellence," Mr. Dalio writes, "not to make people happy."

Keeping the Peace Tips for making your office environment more civil:

- *Address performance or other issues in private.*

- *Don't criticize people behind their backs. Never say or write anything you wouldn't be proud to sign.*

- *In the presence of co-workers practice the 10/5 rule: Within 10 feet, acknowledge the person, and within five feet say hello.*

- *Don't take an employee's contributions for granted; make it a point to thank them.*

- *Be careful taking too much credit for collaborative work; share recognition for work well done.*

- *Never cut off or finish someone's sentences (even to make a point or decision); instead be patient and listen fully before jumping in.*

- *Instead of pointing the finger when you've contributed to a mistake, take responsibility-especially if you're the leader.*

- *When dealing with conflict, performance issues, or other emotionally-laden matters, use face-to-face communication in lieu of email.*

- *When someone is talking to you, pay attention and listen fully; don't half tune in or fidget with your gadget.*

- *Resist the temptation to send unprofessional emails. If it isn't work-appropriate, don't say it or send it all.*

--Christine Porath, an associate professor at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, studies the impact of incivility.