Civility in the Workplace

Workplace civility is essential to employee productivity and retention, good community relations, and the overall quality of the work environment. An article in the *Academy of Management Review* defined workplace civility as “Behaviors that help to preserve the norms for mutual respect in the workplace; civility reflects concern for others.” (Andersson, 1999) In civil environments, employees are able to focus their time and energy on accomplishing the tasks at hand instead of worrying about workplace conflicts. A civil work environment also reduces absenteeism and promotes communication, both of which are vital to increasing productivity. Turnover can be costly to an organization, but civility bolsters employee morale and commitment, resulting in improved employee retention. An organization with a civil environment will have its reputation boosted internally and within the community through positive word of mouth. Here are some measures you can take as a supervisor to foster a civil work environment and manage incivility:

**Make it a priority.** Make your expectations for civil interactions between employees clear to your staff. Set a zero tolerance policy for incivility within your department. Get the word out to your staff that everyone is expected to treat others with care and respect.

**Take preventative measures.** Try your best to identify trouble before it joins your team. This can be achieved during departmental hiring interviews by communicating to candidates that civility is a priority within your department and asking questions geared toward assessing their own commitment to behaving in a civil manner. You should also make a point to thoroughly check candidates’ references before making a hiring decision.

**Be proactive.** Be vigilant about monitoring employee interactions to identify potential problems. Workplace incivility occurs in various contexts such as *communication* (interrupting, publically criticizing, using profanity), *privacy* (peering at someone’s computer, reading someone’s mail), *personal boundaries* (taking things off someone’s desk, not returning loaned items), *interpersonal relationships* (taking credit for another’s work, spreading rumors, being dismissive), *environmental* (not cleaning up after oneself, playing loud or taste-specific music, displaying offensive objects), and *diversity* (participating in intolerant behavior regarding race, gender, age, or other differences). By ignoring occurrences of incivility, you are allowing it to fester and potentially spiral out of control.

**Don’t be an enabler.** Resist the urge to quickly dismiss reports of incivility when they do not correspond with your own positive interactions with the alleged instigator. Habitual offenders usually target peers and subordinates rather than acting out toward a supervisor. When input from staff is dismissed or ignored, it sends an implicit message to everyone that such behavior is tolerated. It’s also important not to make excuses for these habitual offenders. “That’s just how John is,” is the type of justification that will encourage negative behavior rather than nip it in the bud.
Lead by example. Role modeling has a huge impact on the level of civility in a workplace. Once you establish a norm for respectful behavior in your department, it is essential that you follow it as well. Here are some ways to set a good example and help foster civility among your staff:

- Be an attentive listener
- Give credit to employees for their accomplishments
- Create an environment where concerns, criticisms, and conflicts are openly raised, focused on accomplishing the work, and discussed in a respectful manner
- Commit to keeping employees informed and passing along information appropriately
- Collaborate on important issues by seeking out the opinions and expertise of others
- Talk in terms of “we” instead of creating “us and them” distinctions
- Foster respect for organizational structures and roles
- Value employees’ backgrounds and experiences
- Speak positively about the organization and the future rather than negatively or expressing cynicism