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SundayReview | OPINION

No Time to Be Nice at Work

By CHRISTINE PORATH JUNE 19, 2015

MEAN bosses could have killed my father. I vividly recall walking into a hospital room outside of Cleveland to see my strong, athletic dad lying with electrodes strapped to his bare chest. What put him there? I believe it was work-related stress. For years he endured two uncivil bosses.

Rudeness and bad behavior have all grown over the last decades, particularly at work. For nearly 20 years I've been studying, consulting and collaborating with organizations around the world to learn more about the costs of this incivility. How we treat one another at work matters. Insensitive interactions have a way of whittling away at people's health, performance and souls.

Robert M. Sapolsky, a Stanford professor and the author of "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers," argues that when people experience intermittent stressors like incivility for too long or too often, their immune systems pay the price. We also may experience major health problems, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and ulcers.

Intermittent stressors — like experiencing or witnessing uncivil incidents or even replaying one in your head — elevate levels of hormones called glucocorticoids throughout the day, potentially leading to a host of health problems, including increased appetite and obesity. A study published in 2012

that tracked women for 10 years concluded that stressful jobs increased the risk of a cardiovascular event by 38 percent.

Bosses produce demoralized employees through a string of actions: walking away from a conversation because they lose interest; answering calls in the middle of meetings without leaving the room; openly mocking people by pointing out their flaws or personality quirks in front of others; reminding their subordinates of their "role" in the organization and "title"; taking credit for wins, but pointing the finger at others when problems arise. Employees who are harmed by this behavior, instead of sharing ideas or asking for help, hold back.

I've surveyed hundreds of people across organizations spanning more than 17 industries, and asked people why they behaved uncivilly. Over half of them claim it is because they are overloaded, and more than 40 percent say they have no time to be nice. But respect doesn't necessarily require extra time. It's about how something is conveyed; tone and nonverbal manner are crucial.

INCIVILITY also hijacks workplace focus. According to a survey of more than 4,500 doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel, 71 percent tied disruptive behavior, such as abusive, condescending or insulting personal conduct, to medical errors, and 27 percent tied such behavior to patient deaths.

My studies with Amir Erez, a management professor at the University of Florida, show that people working in an environment characterized by incivility miss information that is right in front of them. They are no longer able to process it as well or as efficiently as they would otherwise.

In one study, the experimenter belittled the peer group of the participants, who then performed 33 percent worse on anagram word puzzles and came up with 39 percent fewer creative ideas during a brainstorming task focused on how they might use a brick. In our second study, a stranger — a

"busy professor" encountered en route to the experiment — was rude to participants by admonishing them for bothering her. Their performance was 61 percent worse on word puzzles, and they produced 58 percent fewer ideas in the brick task than those who had not been treated rudely. We found the same pattern for those who merely witnessed incivility: They performed 22 percent worse on word puzzles and produced 28 percent fewer ideas in the brainstorming task.

Incivility shuts people down in other ways, too. Employees contribute less and lose their conviction, whether because of a boss saying, "If I wanted to know what you thought, I'd ask you," or screaming at an employee who overlooks a typo in an internal memo.

Customers behave the same way. In studies I did with the marketing professors Deborah MacInnis and Valerie S. Folkes at the University of Southern California, we found that people were less likely to patronize a business that has an employee who is perceived as rude — whether the rudeness is directed at them or at other employees. Witnessing a short negative interaction leads customers to generalize about other employees, the organization and even the brand.

Many are skeptical about the returns of civility. A quarter believe that they will be less leader-like, and nearly 40 percent are afraid that they'll be taken advantage of if they are nice at work. Nearly half think that it is better to flex one's muscles to garner power. They are jockeying for position in a competitive workplace and don't want to put themselves at a disadvantage.

Why is respect — or lack of it — so potent? Charles Horton Cooley's 1902 notion of the "looking glass self" explains that we use others' expressions (smiles), behaviors (acknowledging us) and reactions (listening to us or insulting us) to define ourselves. How we believe others see us shapes who we are. We ride a wave of pride or get swallowed in a sea of embarrassment based on brief interactions that signal respect or disrespect. Individuals feel valued

and powerful when respected. Civility lifts people. Incivility holds people down. It makes people feel small.

Even though a growing number of people are disturbed by incivility, I've found that it has continued to climb over the last two decades. A quarter of those I surveyed in 1998 reported that they were treated rudely at work at least once a week. That figure rose to nearly half in 2005, then to just over half in 2011.

Incivility often grows out of ignorance, not malice. A surgeon told me that until he received some harsh feedback, he was clueless that so many people thought he was a jerk. He was simply treating residents the way he had been trained.

Technology distracts us. We're wired to our smartphones. It's increasingly challenging to be present and to listen. It's tempting to fire off texts and emails during meetings; to surf the Internet while on conference calls or in classes; and, for some, to play games rather than tune in. While offering us enormous conveniences, electronic communication also leads to misunderstandings. It's easy to misread intentions. We can take out our frustrations, hurl insults and take people down a notch from a safe distance.

Although in surveys people say they are afraid they will not rise in an organization if they are really friendly and helpful, the civil do succeed. My recent studies with Alexandra Gerbasi and Sebastian Schorch at the Grenoble École de Management, published in the Journal of Applied Psychology, show that behavior involving politeness and regard for others in the workplace pays off. In a study in a biotechnology company, those seen as civil were twice as likely to be viewed as leaders.

Civility elicits perceptions of warmth and competence. Susan T. Fiske, a professor at Princeton, and Amy J. C. Cuddy, a professor at Harvard, with their colleagues have conducted research that suggests that these two traits drive our impressions of others, accounting for more than 90 percent of the

variation in the positive or negative impressions we form of those around us. These impressions dictate whether people will trust you, build relationships with you, follow you and support you.

The catch: There can be a perceived inverse relationship between warmth and competence. A strength in one can suggest a weakness of the other. Some people are seen as competent but cold — he's very smart, but people will hate working for him. Or they're seen as warm but incompetent — she's really friendly, but probably not very smart.

Leaders can use simple rules to win the hearts and minds of their people — with huge returns. Making small adjustments such as listening, smiling, sharing and thanking others more often can have a huge impact. In one unpublished experiment I conducted, a smile and simple thanks (as compared with not doing this) resulted in people being viewed as 27 percent warmer, 13 percent more competent and 22 percent more civil.

Civil gestures can spread. Ochsner Health System, a large Louisiana health care provider, implemented what it calls the "10/5 way." Employees are encouraged to make eye contact if they're within 10 feet of someone, and say hello if they're within five feet. Ochsner reports improvements on patient satisfaction and patient referrals.

To be fully attentive and improve your listening skills, remove obstacles. John Gilboy told me about a radical approach he took as an executive of a multibillion-dollar consumer products company. Desperate to stop excessive multitasking in his weekly meetings, he decided to experiment: he placed a box at the door and required all attendees to drop their smartphones in it so that everyone would be fully engaged and attentive to one another. He didn't allow people to use their laptops either. The change was a challenge; initially employees were "like crack addicts as the box was buzzing," he said. But the meetings became vastly more productive. Within weeks, they slashed the length of the meetings by half. He reported more presence, participation and,

as the tenor of the meetings changed, fun.

What about the jerks who seem to succeed despite being rude and thoughtless? Those people have succeeded despite their incivility, not because of it. Studies by Morgan W. McCall Jr., a professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California, including those with Michael Lombardo while they were with the Center for Creative Leadership, have shown that the No. 1 characteristic associated with an executive's failure is an insensitive, abrasive or bullying style.

Power can force compliance. But insensitivity or disrespect often sabotages support in crucial situations. Employees may fail to share important information and withhold efforts or resources. Sooner or later, uncivil people sabotage their success — or at least their potential. Payback may come immediately or when they least expect it, and it may be intentional or unconscious.

Civility pays dividends. J. Gary Hastings, a retired judge in Los Angeles, told me that when he informally polled juries about what determined their favor, he found that respect — and how attorneys behaved — was crucial. Juries were swayed based on thin slices of civil or arrogant behavior.

Across many decisions — whom to hire, who will be most effective in teams, who will be able to be influential — civility affects judgments and may shift the balance toward those who are respectful.

Given the enormous cost of incivility, it should not be ignored. We all need to reconsider our behavior. You are always in front of some jury. In every interaction, you have a choice: Do you want to lift people up or hold them down?

Correction: June 28, 2015

An opinion essay last Sunday on incivility misspelled the surname of a chief executive who banned the use of cellphones and laptops in

his company's meetings. He is John Gilboy, not Gilroy.

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