Brandon Hall Group

Making the Workplace Feel Safe Again:

How to Improve Civility in your Organization

2018

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Civility

Civility is defined as the act of showing regard for others by being polite. At its core, civility is about connecting in a human way with others. It conveys both warmth and courtesy.

Incivility

Incivility, conversely, is rude or unsociable speech or behavior. It is found almost everywhere in society, from government agencies, to shopping malls, to cable news, and social media sites.

Workplace incivility can take many forms, including:

- Employees focusing on mobile phones or laptops when they are supposed to be engaging colleagues in person at meetings or on conference calls.

- Employees taking credit — often undeservedly — for work accomplishments, while pointing fingers at colleagues at the first signs of difficulty.

- Name calling, or profanity, during times of conflict.

- Bullying and intimidation.

- Sexual harassment through innuendos or inappropriate comments.

Cause of Incivility

Internal Forces

Many internal factors create stress that drives workplace incivility, including:

- **Increased expectations.** Many companies espouse a "do more with less" philosophy in pursuit of increased profitability and growth despite dwindling resources.

- **A changing workforce.** The number of remote workers is quickly increasing, which can create a sense of isolation. Also, four generations of workers, who often have very different workplace expectations, can create conflict.

- **Workplace culture.** Some environments reward conformity, and some are full of competition, which can result in workers feeling insecure.

- **Toxic employees.** A toxic employee or two can bring down an entire workplace. The impact can be particularly negative when members of the leadership team are the ones creating a negative environment.

External Forces

- **Political extremism.** As demonstrated in recent local, state, and national elections, we live in an era of political polarization where people with opposing views have little tolerance for one another and lash out in the traditional and social media.

- **Personal Stress.** Personal issues outside of the workplace can also impact an employee's behavior on the job.

- **Social Media.** An endless array of social networks have empowered people to express themselves, often without any filter or fear of retribution. This is because they can remain anonymous or hide behind their screen, rather than experiencing the impact of their words.

Cost of Incivility

Incivility can carry with it heavy costs because managing these types of issues can be expensive. Just one incident can occupy weeks of attention and effort.

But the cost of incivility is much more than time, money or even an impact on your organization's reputation. For example, incivility can have a negative impact on employee engagement, which is a strategic priority for seven in 10 organizations. Brandon Hall Group research indicates that organizations encourage and assess engagement because it impacts – and to some degree, defines — the corporate culture.

Top Drivers of Employee Engagement Programs

72%	65%	56%	54%
Enhance the culture	Improving organizational performance	Encourage teamwork and collaboration	Improve productivity

51%	48%	44%	40%
Promote organizational values	Improve employee morale	Improve employee relationships	Improve individual performance

Source: 2018 Brandon Hall Group Employee Engagement Survey
Percentages reflect the number or organizations responding to each survey answer choice.

Poor behavior, whether it is by a few individual performers, management or both, can have a negative impact on engagement, which can affect everything from the individuals involved, to teams, departments and business units. If behaviors that impact engagement are not controlled and changed over time, the behaviors can become part of the culture. The Brandon Hall Group research shows that more than half of organizations say that less than 40% of employees are highly engaged.

Cures for Incivility – *Strategic*

As serious a problem as incivility is, there are also many ways to prevent it, or turn things around. There are both strategic and specific cures for lack of civility in the workplace. Let's start with the strategic:

Top reasons for first-year attrition

#1 Mismatch between hiring promise and actual work environment

#3 Organizational/culture fit issues

Your Hiring Process

Your employment brand reflects a commitment to a welcoming work environment where all employees treat each other with respect. With all prospective employees, your organization can set the standard from the first interaction: your organization will not tolerate incivility.
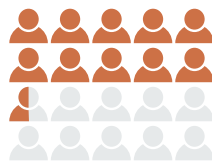
57%
of organizations want to improve how they assimilate employees into the culture.
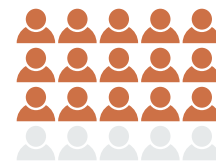
76%
of organizations include ethics/values in the training portion of onboarding.

Onboarding

67%

of organizations spend less than 6 hours per year per employee on soft skills training. You can increase it, or change focus to include training on civility.

Assimilation and training during onboarding are optimal opportunities to make sure employees understand your values and provide them with resources to help them meet that standard.

Learning and Development

71%

of organizations have a diversity and inclusion program or are implementing one.

Your ongoing L&D programs can pick up where onboarding leaves off. Soft skills training can help emphasize or re-emphasize the importance of civility as part of your workplace culture. Micro-learning is a great way to offer performance support for people who struggle with soft skills, have trouble controlling their emotions when dealing with conflict or stress, or other situations that can lead to incivility.

Diversity and Inclusion

D&I programs provide an opportunity to talk about respecting all people, respecting differences, and being civil even if you have a conflict with someone.

If you make civility and respect for others a consistent theme, beginning with recruitment and continuing throughout the employee experience, you will in essence be building a culture of civility that can correct any issues you have now, or prevent future problems.

Cures for Incivility – *Specific*

Be Clear about Expectations

There are also many specific solutions to incivility. One is to make respect part of your mission statement, core values and culture, and be clear about expectations.

Initiate a Civility Awareness Program

Self-assessments are an excellent way to make employees aware of their behaviors. For example, you can learn how stress impacts your actions in certain circumstances. Additionally, you can learn how your colleagues process information and how to "flex" into other ways of thinking to adapt to others – how they think, what they value, and how they communicate – so you can bridge the gap, quickly.

Attack Hidden Bias

Unconscious bias is an innate human characteristic and, unfortunately, even the most open-minded and well-meaning individuals allow unconscious feelings to guide their decision-making. Building a civil culture means building an inclusive culture. Assessments again are a great tool for this challenge.

Align Performance Management

Once you create civility awareness, it's important to take the next step and create accountability.

Civility should be included in performance evaluations. However, it also needs to be addressed in-the-moment, both through positive reinforcement if someone handles a difficult situation well, and with constructive feedback if civility is lacking or could be improved.

Organizations should create an environment where it's acceptable to call something out and hold people accountable in the moment. Employees need to feel comfortable and secure in standing up for themselves or others when behaviors are not appropriate.

Hire for Civility

There is no better way to introduce the importance of civility than at the beginning, with yourinterview process. However, only 11% of organizations consider civility during the hiring process.

We recommend gathering information on candidate soft skills and competencies through behavioral interviewing, group interviewing, as well as improved reference checking.

Conduct Behavioral Interviews

Develop a set of questions specifically to learn about candidates' emotional intelligence. This includes navigating difficult conversations, managing stress, constructive feedback, listening, expressing empathy, and any other soft skills your organization believes are important for evaluating civility in your culture. Make sure you use the same set of questions so that all candidates are evaluated consistently. Ideally, questions are developed in a collaborative manner with the people who will conduct the interviews so there is consensus.

Also make sure interviewers are trained in behavioral interviewing, which focuses on candidates' past experiences. Past behavior is a good predictor of future behavior, so behavioral questions can be very revealing, if done correctly.
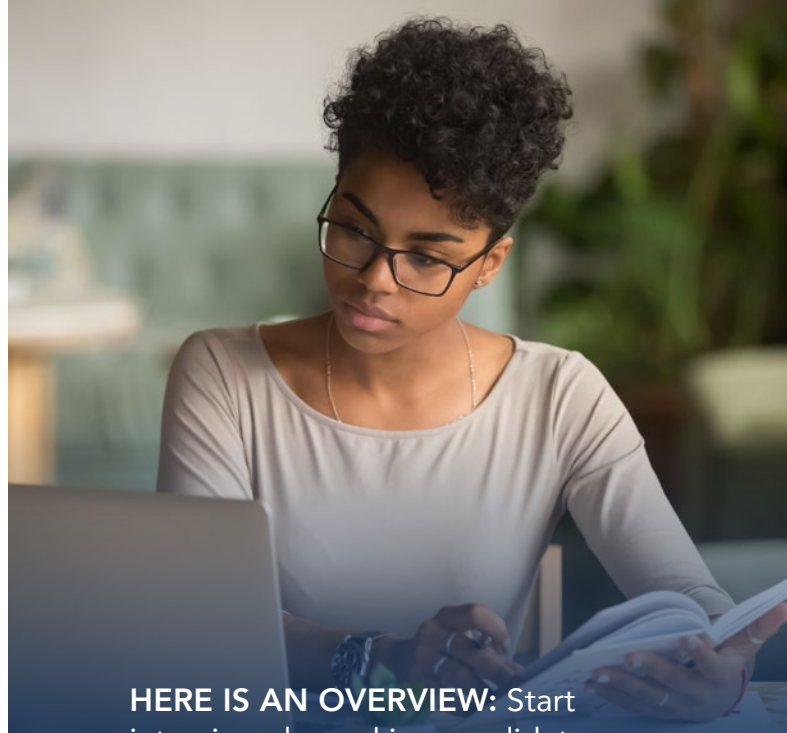
HERE IS AN OVERVIEW: Start interviews by making candidates comfortable through casual conversation. Then ask a few traditional questions about background and experience. Next you'll ask about a recent situation at work that included a difficult challenge – one that ended as a success. Example: "Describe a problem you faced that was overwhelming and how you got through it." Encourage candidates to tell the story briefly at first. Then, go over the entire story, asking very specific questions about what they thought, felt, and did throughout. Then ask them about an unsuccessful situation. Once they answer, ask what they learned from it, and what they would do differently next time. Make sure to end on a positive note by asking about another success story.

Conduct group interviews

Another great way to ensure you're hiring for civility is to conduct group interviews. It's useful to give your team members a say about their prospective colleagues. Group interviews provide a more relaxed atmosphere, making it easier to pick up on soft skills. As with behavioral interviewing, it is important to prepare the group interviewers and have them ask specifically prepared questions that are used consistently so that responses between candidates can be compared.

Improve reference checking

Another way to get information on candidates' soft skills is getting feedback from those who previously worked with them. Online reference checking asks references how candidates performed in the past on specific behavioral competencies related to civility and other soft skills. Traditional phone reference checks are difficult because references can be hard to reach, and many companies have policies against providing references. Online reference checking asks candidates' references to confidentially and anonymously assess their past workplace behavior. References receive a job-specific survey with about 25 questions that quickly assess soft skills. For example: How would Sally rate on a scale of 1 to 5 with "Treating other people, regardless of background or gender, with fairness and respect?"

Conclusion

Civility in the workplace is vitally important for person-to-person relationships and to establish and maintain a culture that respects differences, diversity, inclusion. For further exploration of the strategies and techniques we've discussed, we offer these excellent resources.

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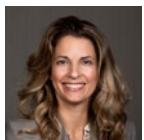
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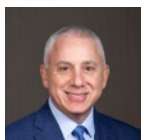
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