

HR 101

BY MELISSA CAMPEAU

CIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Anyone who has spent time in an office environment has likely endured a little incivility: The co-worker with the very loud phone voice, the perpetually grumpy cubicle mate or the staffer who eats fragrant meals at her desk every day. More than just irritating, these seemingly minor acts of incivility can add up to something much more serious if they're not addressed.

Linda Allan, a business behaviourist and a certified management consultant with 30 years experience in corporate roles, describes civility in the workplace as, "conducting yourself in a way that respects the space and ideals of your co-workers." When instances of incivility are left unaddressed, says Allan, employees can become territorial, hoard information and adopt a me-against-you attitude.

Why does this happen?

According to Allan, incivility in the workplace has been on the rise for the past few years. "In the economic downturn, workloads went up and everyone has been under more pressure," she says. "Now there is less attention paid to how people behave and cubicle conduct has really slipped."

She suggests that too-casual work attire can lead to trouble, too. "If people are dressed in suits in the office, there's a certain decorum that's observed and it tends to permeate the whole organization," says Allan. Cultural differences can also be the cause of some inadvertent slips in civility. While a multicultural workforce is an asset to an organization in many ways, some actions perceived as rude by co-workers may simply be the result of cultural differences.

Act quickly

Addressing issues when they first arise is key. "What we think, is what we feel, is how we act," says Allan. "If small annoyances are not addressed, employees' thinking can turn into emotion and then turn into action."

In many cases, says Allan, it is appropriate to address a concern verbally, during a company meeting. "I would suggest keeping the commentary anecdotal, reporting comments from a client visiting the office, for example, so as not to single out any one person or department."

Follow the code

Allan recommends adding a "respect in the workplace" piece to existing codes of conduct, requesting input directly from employees, so it can reflect what staff members would like to see – and avoid – in the workplace. If codes of conduct and expectations for behaviour and communication are clearly outlined, it's easier to hold people accountable.

Go back to school

At Aegon Canada, Fiona Betivoiu, senior manager of training and development, offers training to all employees on a regular basis about respect in the workplace, business and meeting etiquette, and communication skills. "We offer a leadership certification program to our managers focusing on the value of coaching, asking questions and adapting our communication styles. Three months after the program is over I check up on all graduates to see how they are doing, find out if they're asking questions of their staff and if they're adapting to different communication styles," she says.

Defining a culture for new employees as soon as they walk through the front door is one approach to preventing trouble in the future. Allan recommends a day of training for new employees, during which HR spends time talking about what expectations are for culture and civility. "This kind of investment," she says, "pays handsomely in terms of newcomers taking the messaging to heart."

Melissa Campeau is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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