

Simply Civil

By Joe Whitefield

One of the great challenges in any organization is maintaining a positive work environment that is productive, professional, and emotionally healthy. From my current readings, conversations, and personal observations, it appears that civility – consistently being nice to others – in the workplace and society is on the decline. Look around. How would you rate the civility of your organization?

One of the common reasons often cited for a decline in the “niceness” of people in the workplace is that they are under great levels of stress. You do not have to look too far to see an abundance of sources for the stress and pressures people feel today. When at work, employees deal with the normal job-related pressures involving deadlines, performance, work load, and relationships with customers and colleagues. Employees also bring to work their burdens of family stress, financial pressures, and health issues. While these stressors are real, it is not automatic that incivility should result. But for the purpose of this article, let’s connect the two and move on to the behavior.

Ironically, a lack of civility can itself be a major stressor in the workplace. It contributes to an unhealthy environment that becomes an incubator for the pressures and stresses that people seem to despise. In essence, uncivil encounters (from general rudeness up to and including hostility and harassment) between colleagues at work can create new personal problems as well exacerbate the typical productivity problems. Let’s face it; no one likes a poor work environment with a major morale problem.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

So, given the ever-present causes of stress and tension and the poor behavior that often accompanies them, how can we improve the work environment? Most often the process of improvement begins at the individual level with genuine *self awareness*. We should each step back for a moment and look at our typical behavior in certain situations. When do you get upset or moody? How do you talk to and treat others when you are in that state of mind? Take a realistic look in the mirror. Don’t make excuses for yourself or underestimate how abrasive you can be to others.

Once you have a picture of yourself, the next step is developing *self control*. Appropriate self control measures can include a wide variety of simple things. Take a breath. Pause before you speak. Sleep on it. It seems that the most

C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

be some negative words that you need to eliminate from your vocabulary as well as some positive words you should consider adding.

KNOW OTHERS

Once you have a realistic view of self, look at others in your organization. *Social awareness* begins with a desire to understand people better in order to foster a better relationship. What types and level of stress are they

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regretful words are typically spoken in haste. Learn to hit a pause button to allow tensions to subside. Also, tone of voice and body language are the true communicators when tensions are high. Talk with a quieter voice and maintain an appropriate distance from others individual space. Finally, there may

under? How do they typically respond when pressures mounts at work or at home? When looking at our own behavior patterns it is easy to overstate the stressors and pressures (causes) and understate the negative behaviors (effects). This can be easily reversed when we evaluate the behavior of others.

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TAKING THE LEAD

The final step is to improve your *social interactions* with others. This is an area where you must take the lead. In a professional setting, don't focus on how much you "like" one another. Rather, focus on having positive interactions that are based on respect and common courtesy. Respect is the key to the whole thing. The issue of respect is quite comprehensive and involves areas such as:

- Respect for others as people
- Respect for positional authority
- Respect for the institution or organization
- Respect for yourself

When the element of respect is absent, all other social niceties seem phony. So, in order to have a healthy work environment, respect is a must. Add some common courtesy to the mix, and you might have the makings of a positive place to work.

In summary, a lot is being said today about the decline in workplace civility and the increase of stress and pressure people feel. Perhaps the decline in civility is more closely tied to the decrease in the respect people have for themselves and others. Our work environments can be places where emotions run high. Simply demanding everyone "be happy" or "get along" is not enough. True leaders must take the lead. Look at yourself, seek to understand others, and set the example in speech and action. Ramp up the respect, and add a dash of courtesy. This could go a long way to improving the morale of the organization and the productivity as well. As always, get help from Human Resources or others if situations dictate. In one episode of *M*A*S*H*, Frank Burns was complimented for being uncharacteristically kind to someone who had been kind to him. His response to this compliment

was, "It's nice to be nice to the nice." I think we can do a little better than Frank, and cultivate a positive environ-

ment for everyone in our organization rather than just a few.

Wouldn't that be nice? ☺

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