Christine Porath: Why being disrespectful to your coworkers is good for business

Who do you want to be? It's a simple question, and whether you know it or not, you're answering it every day through your actions. This one question will define your professional success more than any other, because how you show up and treat people means everything. Either you lift people up by respecting them, making them feel valued, appreciated and heard, or you hold people down by making them feel small, insulted, disregarded or excluded. And who you choose to be means everything.

I study the effects of incivility on people. What is incivility? It's disrespect or rudeness. It includes a lot of different behaviors, from mocking or belittling someone to teasing people in ways that sting to telling offensive jokes to texting in meetings. And what's uncivil to one person may be absolutely fine to another. Take texting while someone's speaking to you. Some of us may find it rude, others may think it's absolutely civil. So it really depends. It's all in the eyes of the beholder and whether that person felt disrespected. We may not mean to make someone feel that way, but when we do, it has consequences.

Over 22 years ago, I vividly recall walking into this stuffy hospital room. It was heartbreaking to see my dad, this strong, athletic, energetic guy, lying in the bed with electrodes strapped to his bare chest. What put him there was work-related stress. For over a decade, he suffered an uncivil boss. And for me, I thought he was just an outlier at that time. But just a couple years later, I witnessed and experienced a lot of incivility in my first job out of college. I spent a year going to work every day and hearing things from coworkers like, "Are you an idiot? That's not how it's done," and, "If I wanted your opinion, I'd ask."

So I did the natural thing. I quit, and I went back to grad school to study the effects of this. There, I met Christine Pearson. And she had a theory that small, uncivil actions can lead to much bigger problems like aggression and violence. We believed that incivility affected performance and the bottom line. So we launched a study, and what we found was eye-opening.

We sent a survey to business school alumni working in all different organizations. We asked them to write a few sentences about one experience where they were treated rudely, disrespectfully or insensitively, and to answer questions about how they reacted. One person told us about a boss that made insulting statements like, "That's kindergartner's work," and another tore up someone's work in front of the entire team. And what we found is that incivility made people less motivated: 66 percent cut back work efforts, 80 percent lost time worrying about what happened, and 12 percent left their job.

And after we published these results, two things happened. One, we got calls from organizations. Cisco read about these numbers, took just a few of these and estimated, conservatively, that incivility was costing them 12 million dollars a year.

The second thing that happened was, we heard from others in our academic field who said, "Well, people are reporting this, but how can you really show it? Does people's performance really suffer?" I was curious about that, too. With Amir Erez, I compared those that experienced incivility to those that didn't experience incivility. And what we found is that those that experience incivility do actually function much worse.

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"OK," you may say. "This makes sense. After all, it's natural that their performance suffers." But what about if you're not the one who experiences it? What if you just see or hear it? You're a witness. We wondered if it affected witnesses, too.

So we conducted studies where five participants would witness an experimenter act rudely to someone who arrived late to the study. The experimenter said, "What is it with you? You arrive late, you're irresponsible. Look at you! How do you expect to hold a job in the real world?" And in another study in a small group, we tested the effects of a peer insulting a group member. Now, what we found was really interesting, because witnesses' performance decreased, too -- and not just marginally, quite significantly.

Incivility is a bug. It's contagious, and we become carriers of it just by being around it. And this isn't confined to the workplace. We can catch this virus anywhere -- at home, online, in schools and in our communities. It affects our emotions, our motivation, our performance and how we treat others. It even affects our attention and can take some of our brainpower. And this happens not only if we experience incivility or we witness it. It can happen even if we just see or read rude words. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

To test this, we gave people combinations of words to use to make a sentence. But we were very sneaky. Half the participants got a list with 15 words used to trigger rudeness: impolitely, interrupt, obnoxious, bother. Half the participants received a list of words with none of these rude triggers. And what we found was really surprising, because the people who got the rude words were five times more likely to miss information right in front of them on the computer screen. And as we continued this research, what we found is that those that read the rude words took longer to make decisions, to record their decisions, and they made significantly more errors. This can be a big deal, especially when it comes to life-and-death situations.

Steve, a physician, told me about a doctor that he worked with who was never very respectful, especially to junior staff and nurses. But Steve told me about this one particular interaction where this doctor shouted at a medical team. Right after the interaction, the team gave the wrong dosage of medication to their patient. Steve said the information was right there on the chart, but somehow everyone on the team missed it. He said they lacked the attention or awareness to take it into account. Simple mistake, right? Well, that patient died.

Researchers in Israel have actually shown that medical teams exposed to rudeness perform worse not only in all their diagnostics, but in all the procedures they did. This was mainly because the teams exposed to rudeness didn't share information as readily, and they stopped seeking help from their teammates. And I see this not only in medicine but in all industries.

So if incivility has such a huge cost, why do we still see so much of it? I was curious, so we surveyed people about this, too. The number one reason is stress. People feel overwhelmed. The other reason that people are not more civil is because they're skeptical and even concerned about being civil or appearing nice. They believe they'll appear less leader-like. They wonder: Do nice guys finish last? Or in other words: Do jerks get

ahead? (Laughter) It's easy to think so, especially when we see a few prominent examples that dominate the conversation.

Well, it turns out, in the long run, they don't. There's really rich research on this by Morgan McCall and Michael Lombardo when they were at the Center for Creative Leadership. They found that the number one reason tied to executive failure was an insensitive, abrasive or bullying style. There will always be some outliers that succeed despite their incivility. Sooner or later, though, most uncivil people sabotage their success. For example, with uncivil executives, it comes back to hurt them when they're in a place of weakness or they need something. People won't have their backs.

But what about nice guys? Does civility pay? Yes, it does. And being civil doesn't just mean that you're not a jerk. Not holding someone down isn't the same as lifting them up. Being truly civil means doing the small things, like smiling and saying hello in the hallway, listening fully when someone's speaking to you. Now, you can have strong opinions, disagree, have conflict or give negative feedback civilly, with respect. Some people call it "radical candor," where you care personally, but you challenge directly. So yes, civility pays. In a biotechnology firm, colleagues and I found that those that were seen as civil were twice as likely to be viewed as leaders, and they performed significantly better. Why does civility pay? Because people see you as an important -- and a powerful -- unique combination of two key characteristics: warm and competent, friendly and smart. In other words, being civil isn't just about motivating others. It's about you. If you're civil, you're more likely to be seen as a leader. You'll perform better, and you're seen as warm and competent.

But there's an even bigger story about how civility pays, and it ties to one of the most important questions around leadership: What do people want most from their leaders? We took data from over 20,000 employees around the world, and we found the answer was simple: respect. Being treated with respect was more important than recognition and appreciation, useful feedback, even opportunities for learning. Those that felt respected were healthier, more focused, more likely to stay with their organization and far more engaged.

So where do you start? How can you lift people up and make people feel respected? Well, the nice thing is, it doesn't require a huge shift. Small things can make a big difference. I found that thanking people, sharing credit, listening attentively, humbly asking questions, acknowledging others and smiling has an impact.

Patrick Quinlan, former CEO of Ochsner Health [System], told me about the effects of their 10-5 way, where if you're within 10 feet of someone, you make eye contact and smile, and if you're within five feet, you say hello. He explained that civility spread, patient satisfaction scores rose, as did patient referrals.

Civility and respect can be used to boost an organization's performance. When my friend Doug Conant took over as CEO of Campbell's Soup Company in 2001, the company's market share had just dropped in half. Sales were declining, lots of people had just been laid off. A Gallup manager said it was the least engaged organization that they had surveyed. And as Doug drove

up to work his first day, he noticed that the headquarters was surrounded by barbwire fence. There were guard towers in the parking lot. He said it looked like a minimum security prison. It felt toxic.

Within five years, Doug had turned things around. And within nine years, they were setting all-time performance records and racking up awards, including best place to work. How did he do it? On day one, Doug told employees that he was going to have high standards for performance, but they were going to do it with civility. He walked the talk, and he expected his leaders to. For Doug, it all came down to being tough-minded on standards and tenderhearted with people. For him, he said it was all about these touch points, or these daily interactions he had with employees, whether in the hallway, in the cafeteria or in meetings. And if he handled each touch point well, he'd make employees feel valued.

Another way that Doug made employees feel valued and showed them that he was paying attention is that he handwrote over 30,000 thank-you notes to employees. And this set an example for other leaders. Leaders have about 400 of these touch points a day. Most don't take long, less than two minutes each. The key is to be agile and mindful in each of these moments.

Civility lifts people. We'll get people to give more and function at their best if we're civil. Incivility chips away at people and their performance. It robs people of their potential, even if they're just working around it. What I know from my research is that when we have more civil environments, we're more productive, creative, helpful, happy and healthy.

We can do better. Each one of us can be more mindful and can take actions to lift others up around us, at work, at home, online, in schools and in our communities. In every interaction, think: Who do you want to be?

Let's put an end to incivility bug and start spreading civility. After all, it pays.

Thank you.