Chapter 40

Workplace Incivility as Low-Level Violence:
Theories, Consequences, and Future Research Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter intends to inform the readers about workplace incivility, which is being rude to one's colleagues, with no apparent intention to harm. It is regarded as the basic level of counterproductive work behavior that might be tremendously injurious to an organization and its members. Not greeting subordinates, making sarcastic grimaces while talking with a coworker, and spreading rumors about the supervisor are few examples to incivility. The progenitors of workplace incivility research are two prominent organizational scientists from the USA, Lynne Andersson and Christine Pearson. They coined this term and published about this concept in a 1999 article. In the 17 years since its introduction, lots of researchers from different countries published about diverse aspects of incivility, its antecedents, consequences, measurement methods and interventions. Since incivility researchers tested myriad theories mainly from psychology, health, and criminology disciplines using both experimental and empirical methods, currently there is a huge accumulation of data.

INTRODUCTION

In the simplest sense, workplace incivility is being verbally or non-verbally rude to one's colleagues with seemingly unclear intention. In theoretical and research articles, it has been documented as a progressive, dynamic, and risky issue (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Estes & Wang, 2008; Reio & Ghosh, 2009; Trudel & Reio, 2011; Porath & Pearson, 2013). It is dynamic because

it depends on shifting interactions between changing numbers of people who themselves are transformed through the nasty process. New players may come into the play, or the original players may leave it at any time. It is progressive in terms of intensity, as well as the increase in the number of exposed people involved. Once an uncivil move started, it is usually reciprocated with more intense reaction than the initial move (Glomb & Liao, 2003). Thus, intensity grows in time as parties try to reciprocate more forcefully than the received incivility.

Since incivility afflicts both those involved and those who vicariously learn about the process, it can inflict damage on the whole workforce (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008), and the negative process can ultimately result in a climate of incivility (Pearson et al., 2000). A supervisor that acts uncivilly can become a role model for a large number of employees (Estes & Wang, 2008), as direct and indirect observers of the uncivil behaviors may learn about, and consequently adopt similar negative interaction styles (Pearson et al., 2000). Thus, incivility may pervade through and disturb the entire organization in surprisingly short time (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005). Therefore, it is regarded as the basic level of counterproductive work behaviors (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) carrying a potential of "extreme harmfulness" to organizations and their members (Meier & Semmer, 2013). After many years of research in the workplace aggression domain, Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout, (2001) warned "workplace incivility merits serious research and organizational attention because of its theoretically harmful effects on organizations and individuals alike (p. 65)".

Although the perception of incivility is a matter of cultural and interpersonal differences, it is still possible to discuss a huge spectrum of uncivil behaviors varying in rudeness level, yet commonly perceived to be rude. A collection of instances of uncivil behaviors noted in literature includes ignoring a partner's salutations, giving a teammate the cold shoulder, sending offensive and belittling messages via body language, mimicry, or oral/written messages to an organizational member; making sarcastic remarks about the supervisor; disgracing a coworker's integrity; looking down on a colleague; reprimanding a colleague for something he/she is not accountable for; chiding a subordinate publicly; making groundless denunciations and spreading rumors and malicious information about an associate (Rau-Foster, 2004; Reio & Ghosh, 2009; Meier & Semmer, 2013).

Other examples to incivility reported often by researchers are not informing a colleague of a common gathering; not silencing mobiles during meetings; texting during social interactions; leaving the workplace areas in a clutter; eavesdropping on others' conversations; disregarding a colleague's entreaties; not letting an assistant complete his/her speech; making provocative comments; mannered attitude while listening to a colleague's speech; and using a colleague's goods without permission (Trudel & Reio; 2011; Cortina & Magley, 2009). In their own study, Trudel and Reio (2011) found that more than 85% of their sample reported being both an instigator and a target of incivility (target-instigators) over the previous year, while doubting someone's judgment, paying little attention, and speaking condescendingly were reported to be the most widespread uncivil behaviors engaged by both groups.

Research investigating such problematic behaviors across various sectors (e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2013) shows that workplace incivility has increasingly become ubiquitous with huge yearly costs (e.g., affecting 98% of employees in the USA amounting to millions of dollars). The motive behind the sudden emergence and incessant growth of such novel and expensive interpersonal issues in society was not simply explicable; a confluence of globalization, scientific and technic innovations, and corporate capitalism led to a social transformation, which also created brand new workplace issues waiting to be controlled by the organizations (O'Toole & Lawler, 2006). Fortunately, two prominent organizational scientists from the USA, Lynne Andersson and Christine Pearson, acquired an interest in theorizing

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