

# Civility and Community: Where has it Gone?

## We need to return to a Caring Ethic

Incivility in society is on the rise. Virtually all people believe this is so. Every day we witness inconsiderate behavior, 'in your face' interaction in communications with others, and other forms of rudeness. There are many causes of incivility not the least of which is the explosion of social media as a way to communicate, including rants on Twitter. The anonymous nature of postings on the Internet feeds into such disrespectful behavior.

The lack of civility has now turned ugly with terrorist acts in churches, movie theaters, schools, and in the workplace. I believe this trend threatens the very fabric of society in the U.S. We may not need to wait for an attack by ISIS. We may need to worry about here at home first.

We have a society where mental health issues seem to be pronounced. Why is that? What is causing it? I believe it is due to the culture of greed in society and getting away from what has made this country great, which is caring about our neighbors and communities. We need to get back to being a civil society.

Civility represents the quality of our behavior with others in our communities. This is important for business because how we treat others signals who we are and what we value. Moreover, since the essence of ethics lies in how we are with others, civility and ethics are intricately linked.

Let us clear up some misconceptions. Civility is not peripheral to ethics, dealing merely with manners. True, civility does manifest itself in good manners, proper etiquette and politeness. But it also runs deeper and is more profound. Simply put, civility requires restraint, respect and responsibility in everyday life. Without these, we can never act ethically.

Ethics deals fundamentally with how we treat each other on a daily basis. Indeed, our small acts of civility and incivility constitute the heart of morality.

Sadly, countless displays of rudeness, unprofessional behavior, disrespect and anger litter corners of our lives: roads, airports, workplace, online, malls, restaurants, schools, hospitals, movie theaters, etc. A Public Agenda Research Group reported that nearly 80 percent of respondents consider "lack of respect and courtesy a serious national problem."

Civility cultivates a civic code of decency. It requires us to discipline our impulses for the sake of others. It demands we free ourselves from self-absorption. By putting ethics into practice in our day-to-day encounters, civility is that moral glue without which our society would come apart.”

Two questions to ponder include: Can you be civil and not entirely ethical? Can you be ethical and not terribly civil? The answer to the first person is 'yes." You can be well behaved and gracious to others but still be motivated by non-ethical values such as greed. I think the second is more difficult. If you are a rude person and care little for others and that is reflected in your tolerance and behavior towards others, I believe you have forfeited the right to call yourself an ethical person. Ethics requires that we treat others the way we would like to be treated. No one wants to be disrespected, ignored, and otherwise treated badly.

Both inside and outside the workplace, we see a rash of disrespectful, discourteous and rude behavior. Angry commuters use their vehicles to take out their aggressions and deliberately cut others off in traffic. Customer service has diminished to the point where most would prefer to use the impersonal ATM machine than face an unhappy bank teller. Malicious political campaigns and tactics draw out the worst in even the most respected individuals. Children face tremendous fear and stress from bullies at school.

The impact of such destructive behavior can be more psychologically damaging than open forms of abuse, such as harassment and violence. From a business and leadership perspective, the negative behavior happening outside of the workplace is trickling in — affecting employee loyalty, organizational commitment and overall productivity. The pressures of everyday life can take their toll on employees who are already working under a great deal of stress. Consequently tempers get frayed and patience and tolerance are thrown out the window.

Encouraging civility in the workplace promotes a low stress work environment and improved employee morale. It also helps to mitigate employee dissatisfaction that often results in such things as civil rights complaints and lawsuits. The economic impact related to litigation, turnover, productivity and customer dissatisfaction can be devastating to an organization.

Civility is essential to defining the culture and establishing a foundation of proper business behavior. It is an underlying value that successful organizations strive to achieve. The link between civil behavior and virtue ethics is the answer—or at least a starting point to bring civility into one’s life, into the workplace, and in communications with others.

Virtue ethics deals with the character traits of individuals who act in a way that defines the type of person they are. Truthfulness, respect, consistent behavior in the way one person treats others, empathy, and trustworthiness are just some of the underlying ethical values that feed civil behavior.

To be able to build and maintain itself as a viable entity capable of reaching its full potential an organization must be able to manage its interpersonal relationships in a manner that promotes positive interactions that are civil and respectful. This is not an easy task considering the myriad personalities and individual circumstance that impact workplace interactions. But it can be accomplished with leadership commitment to fostering positive and meaningful interactions among employees.

Danita Johnson Hughes, Ph.D. addresses this issue in her "[Power Principles for Success](#)." Dr. Hughes provides 3 basic principles to create a civil workplace as follows.

- **Respect** is inherent in the belief that although another person's beliefs may be different than yours, you should still honor their viewpoint and accord the other person due consideration. Taking someone's feelings, ideas, and preferences into consideration indicates that you take them seriously and that their position has worth and value, even if contrary to your own. In so doing, you validate the other person's individuality and right to a differing opinion.
- **Restraint** is simply a matter of exercising personal self-control at all times. Therefore, you should know your triggers. Be aware of how your words and actions affect other people. Being aware of the things that make you angry or upset helps you to monitor and manage your reaction. Think before you act. Remember, you may not be able to control the things others say or do. But, you can control your response.
- **Refinement** is the quest for continual cultivation and improvement of relationships in the workplace. Just as the process of Continual Quality Improvement has come to be known as a means to improve performance and increase efficiency in an organization, refinement of thought, ways of expressing those thoughts and the practice of continuously exercising appropriate decorum when relating to others can go a long way towards enhancing workplace civility. Improving and strengthening relationships requires effort and commitment.

Achieving civility in the workplace requires the involvement of every employee from the top down. Going to work in an environment free from the back-biting, rude employee behavior and the constant complaining that many are subjected to everyday is certainly not ideal. However, making the commitment to achieving and sustaining civility can be the key to a successful and thriving organization with high employee morale.

Ethical leaders should make workplace civility a priority in their business by insisting that all employees exercise these practical ideas. These values are similar to Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

- Pursue understanding first.
- Listen and respect other opinions.
- Seek common ground, even if it's to agree to disagree.
- Tune into what's happening around you; observe the climate
- Accept responsibility for your actions and the consequences of those actions.
- Offer and willingly accept constructive feedback.

The bottom line is ethics and civility are inextricably linked; you can't have one without the other. This means ethics training in business must include discussions of civil behavior and ethical values.

If we are to stem the tide of incivility in society we must commit to civil behavior. *The Golden Rule* is the place to start.

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