Restoring Civility in the Workplace Among All Employees

The typical workforce now consists of employees who work in the office, remotely, or both. A trend of increasing incivility in the personal online lives of people has crept into online work lives. It is damaging to employee engagement and productivity and harms the business.

Ten years ago, numerous studies concerning online behaviors began appearing that pointed out the increasing incivility in online behaviors. It has worsened over the years, and the behaviors once confined to personal lives have crept into work lives. As more employees work remotely, the challenge of maintaining positive relationships among all employees – onsite and remote – has intensified. Rude behavior and communication is found in emails, social media posts, during teleconferences and videoconferences, in voicemail recordings, and eventually between remote workers, who must show up at their physical workforce periodically, and employees working onsite. Researchers are demonstrating that incivility between employees, and employees and managers, harms employee engagement which in turn lowers productivity. Restoring civility begins with top down leadership and will require investing in manager and employee etiquette and communication training, but also important to success is holding people accountable for negative behaviors. It is not any more appropriate for remote workers to be uncivil than it is for employees in a physical worksite.

Extending the Workplace Culture into Cyberspace

The norms and values that create a positive culture should not suddenly become invalidated when employees work remotely. When people worked mostly in the physical workplace, they had opportunities to regularly communicate face-to-face and enjoy social interactions, like eating lunch together or participating in office events. Employee rude behaviors and conflict were quickly dealt with and corrected, usually in face-to-face meetings with department supervisors. Technology now enables companies to have a large and often global remote workforce, and one of the challenges to quickly emerge is issues with incivility between online and in-office workers.

Socialists have bemoaned for years about the growing lack of positive behaviors online, especially on personal social media accounts. Now there seems to be some employees who fail to understand that working in a remote environment does not mean suspension of the workplace policies and positive behaviors applied at the worksite. They send culturally insensitive emails, post biased comments online, are abrupt and rude while attending a virtual meeting or leave annoying voicemail messages. It can work the other way too. Worksite employees have difficulty communicating with remote employees in a civil manner because they have not personally interacted with many of them. The situation gets much worse when managers or supervisors set a poor example and also fail to effectively communicate with employees regardless of their workplace.

Tech Based Toxic and Exclusion Communication

Working at home or in the coffee shop seems to encourage toxic interactions among some employees. It often goes beyond just simple rude behavior, like being abrupt with or insulting someone on a videoconference. Poor communication behaviors include inappropriate chat sessions, texts criticizing a coworker, racial and sexual innuendos on workplace forums, inappropriate jokes, and offensive photos. Some people even use online meetings and other communication channels to exclude people they do not like or maintain a bias towards. They hit mute when particular people are talking, for example. If meeting in the workplace, exclusion is more obvious because there is no mute button.

Incivility is a slippery slope when allowed to continue. If left unfettered, it can lead to humiliation and threats in some cases. It is seen online all the time. Employees must understand that the company's culture extends outside the physical location. This applies to supervisors also. A recent study found that supervision incivility is a source of psychological insecurity in the workplace. The researchers defined supervision incivility as "behavior with ambiguous intent to harm employees in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect." It is not necessarily abusive behavior. It can be abusive behavior, but more common is behavior that is rude or disrespectful. The study found a trickle-down effect of behavior in which group leaders who experience negative behavior from their leaders will, in turn, treat subordinates poorly. Other studies have found that employees experiencing uncivil behavior from coworkers are less engaged, suffer a decline in overall performance, and take their frustrations on coworkers. Incivility is a cost of doing business.

Etiquette In and Out of the Traditional Workplace.

One of the first steps in restoring civility among all workers is reminding employees that employer policies and procedures concerning communication etiquette, inclusion, harassment, and workplace culture apply to everyone. Going beyond a social media policy, the development of additional policies that specifically address remote working and worker interactions can benefit all employees. Policies should be supported with civility training for all employees. Some companies have implemented civility training, but many times it is focused on top level managers. One of the overlooked issues concerning online civility is that employees who are rude to each other are likely being rude to customers, vendors and other company stakeholders.

Many employees have had to adapt to working remotely, learning how to separate personal and work approaches. Employers can help employees develop the appropriate communication etiquette for remote-onsite employee interactions and supervisor or manager online communication with employees. Best practices include educating employees on the importance of being clear in communication when non-verbal cues are not available, asking more questions at the time rather than making assumptions, reinforcing the importance of authenticity, and addressing how employees can maintain respect and dignity during any work-related communication.

When Things Get Tense

Leaders have a responsibility to manage their employees with the same level of fairness no matter where the employees are working. It can be tempting to ignore or at least minimize online conflict. Click off, and the problem is solved. It simply does not work that way. In fact, it is even more

important for leaders and employees to learn how to respond to constructive criticism and develop the emotional intelligence to act appropriately in tense or difficult situations.

Management must address conflict, incivility, bias, and exclusion no matter how or where it is expressed. Managers and supervisors must set clear expectations of employee behavior, lead by example, and conduct regular assessments of self and employees, similar to employee engagement surveys. There could be many incidences of uncivil behavior taking place that the manager is not aware of which is why it is important to periodically check with remote employees individually. Check-ins let employees know they have support and at the same time are expected to uphold organizational values.

Adapting to a New Work Environment

Each employer should review policies and ensure they include employees working onsite and remotely. It is part of being adaptive to a rapidly changing work environment. Ensuring the organization's brand is protected and employees uphold standards is a top priority in a world where some employees only meet online.

Remote working is predicted to continue in the coming years as a standard way of doing business. It does not mean isolation should devolve into a feeling that it is okay to be rude to coworkers, staff or customers.