

Incivility in the Workplace

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Day One

Incivility is out of control! A study reports 70% of U.S. adults say incivility is at a crisis level. Is that true where you work—or where you live?

You see signs of it every time you watch the news or spend any time on social media. It seems we've allowed this lack of civility to creep into our culture until it has somehow become the new normal—as acceptable behavior.

Doesn't this give us Christ-followers a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the difference Jesus makes in our lives? This opens the door for us to be lights in a dark world, and that is what Jesus has called us to.

First, let's define incivility. The textbook definition is "rude or unsociable speech or behavior." Incivility in the workplace can be perhaps more subtle, of lower intensity, maybe not even recognizable at first. But it shows up as lack of courtesy, abandoning simple polite behaviors and practices, or using sarcastic remarks, rude and abrupt responses. And often, the people engaging in uncivil behavior don't intend harm, it's just become a bad habit.

I think it's time we fight back, don't you? I have some simple suggestions you can do to stem the tide of incivility in your world—your work world, your home world, wherever.

Here's my first suggestion: Make sure you say please and thank you at every possible opportunity. Something as simple as that can make a difference, and if those words of courtesy have been lost in your world, reintroduce them! Say them to your family members; often we neglect courtesy in our homes. Find opportunities to thank people and don't be afraid of over-doing it.

I challenge you to keep a count of the number of times you say please or thank you in a given day and determine to increase that number each day. Don't discount the power of polite words spoken at the right time and in the right way. Those words become little rays of light in the darkness.

Day Two

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should lead the way in our worlds to try to stamp out these bad habits of rudeness and replace them with simple courtesies. Good manners do not have to remain a quaint memory from the past.

Examples of workplace incivility include insulting comments, disparaging someone's work, spreading false rumors, and social isolation. I propose you take this as your personal challenge—to do everything you can to stop incivility in your world.

Here's my second suggestion: Be sure to ask at least one person every day how they are doing and then listen to their answer. Don't let them get by with the typical response of "I'm fine" but probe a bit. Maybe you know they haven't felt good lately, so ask how they're feeling. Perhaps they are under a

great deal of stress in their job, and you can ask about that. The most important part of this suggestion is you sincerely ask, and you sincerely listen. Sometimes this can open a door for you to assure them that you will pray for them.

There are very few people in this world who will object to you praying for them, even if they don't pray themselves. When people feel cared for, when they believe at least one person appreciates what they do or what they're going through, it will affect the way they treat others. And this could cause a chain reaction of people caring for others. Imagine how that would improve the morale in your workplace!

Putting these two suggestions together, make it your intention to say please and thank you every time it's appropriate and show care and concern to at least one person every day. It will make a difference—you will make a difference—and Jesus will be honored by your actions.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).

Put on these beautiful attributes each day and I promise you will make a huge dent in turning around incivility in your world.

Day Three

I've given two specific things you can do if you are intentional about bringing back simple common courtesy and civil behavior where you work. First, use the words please and thank you all day every day—as often as it is appropriate. You can't overdo it! Second, ask at least one person a day how they are and then sincerely listen to their answer and respond appropriately. That just means caring about others. As Christ-followers, courtesy and caring should be the norm for us.

The third suggestion is: Watch out for sarcasm because it can become a weapon that hurts others, whether intentionally or not. At my church, one of the pastors said he realized he was too sarcastic, just too often responding with sarcasm. It wasn't intended to harm anyone—indeed it was done as a joke or a clever retort. But he felt it had become a bit much among the staff. So, he put a jar out and suggested that every time someone used sarcasm, they put a dollar in the jar, and then they would give that money to our fellowship fund, for people facing financial hardship.

I don't know how much he raised for the fellowship fund, but I know it caused everyone to be aware that sometimes those clever sarcastic words can be hurtful and sound anything but civil and polite. I'm not saying that you must walk on eggshells for fear of saying the wrong thing. But I have noticed my own tendency to let go of a quick response, intended as a joke, and I need to be careful it doesn't come across as ridicule and hurtful.

For those of us who are prone to use sarcasm, we should keep in mind what we may have meant as a clever response was instead hurtful to someone else. As Christians, we can do much to change a culture of incivility to one of caring and good manners. If there's too much sarcasm in your world it just might contribute to this problem of incivility. Be on guard for this.

Day Four

Incivility leads to many harmful effects on employees and organizations. Coworker incivility has been linked to higher levels of employee burnout and lots of strain and stress. For the organization or the company, incivility has been related to decreased satisfaction and eventually decreased performance. And here's the thing about incivility: it is contagious! An employee who is subjected to lack of civility, lack of good manners, lack of anyone seeming to care about them, often retaliates with uncivil acts of their own. It can spiral out of control within an organization rather quickly. But the good news is courtesy and good manners can be contagious, too.

Remember Jesus has called us as his followers to be lights in a dark world. This means we not only are not caught up in workplace incivility, but we also actively and intentionally try to change the culture. But how?

As I've often said, everything starts at the top, so if you are in a management job or in a place of influence, you should model what civil and courteous behavior looks like. Your level of courtesy and consideration toward others will trickle down to those who work for you and with you. As a manager, you are always "on," which means you don't have the luxury of letting down your guard, because your behavior has more impact than others. By setting the tone for the organization, managers and those in places of influence can help create a culture of simple courtesy, good manners, and caring about others.

As Christ followers, here is our standard:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Philippians 2:3-4).

That is very civil behavior, and with the power of God's Spirit, you can be a person who values others above yourself.

Day Five

Do you know what cyber incivility is? Cyber incivility can be a contributing factor to this epidemic of incivility we are experiencing.

Cyber incivility is uncivil behavior over email, texts, and social media. It is so easy to send something that feels abrupt or unkind because you don't have tone or volume to help communicate your message. Communicating electronically is inherently impersonal, and that's why we have to go the extra mile to make sure our messages are presented in respectful and courteous ways.

A good idea is to re-read everything you send electronically before you hit send; put yourself in the reader's shoes and make sure you've included words of courtesy, words of appreciation, and words that show you care about the person. I know I can be so focused on getting the message out that I forget there is a person on the other end who needs to be recognized as a person, and a few courteous words can make a world of difference.

Then there are the acts of incivility which can seem "victimless," but are still rude behavior that contributes to the overall incivility of the workplace. For example, not refilling the office coffee machine or printer or tossing trash next to the trash can without picking it up are examples of victimless incivility. It does not have an immediate impact on another person, but it violates norms for courtesy, nonetheless.

What do you say? Can we as Christ-followers in a world of incivility make a difference by just showing the love of Jesus and his compassion to the people in our world? We absolutely can, and these simple suggestions I've given you this week are so easy to do, don't cost a thing, and can truly go a long way toward stemming the tide of incivility where you work.

Here's a verse that will help you in this challenge. I encourage you to pray it into your life:

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification (Romans 14:19).