

The High Cost of Rudeness at Work

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An interview with **Christine Porath**, associate professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and coauthor of the article *The Price of Incivility*.

SARAH GREEN: Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast. I'm Sarah Green. I'm talking today with Christine Porath, Associate Professor of Management at Georgetown, and co-author with Christine Pearson of the HBR article, "The Price of Incivility." Christine, thanks so much for talking with us today.

CHRISTINE PORATH: Thanks for having me.

SARAH GREEN: So you have some amazing statistics in this article on how incivility hurts the bottom line. But before we get into some of that, I just wanted to ask, how did you define incivility when you were doing this research? Is it just sort of a breach of etiquette? Or does it even amount of bullying?

CHRISTINE PORATH: We talk about incivility as rudeness, or disrespect. The key is that it's all in the eyes of the beholder. So it's very much how the target, or the person that experiences it interpret things.

SARAH GREEN: OK. So when you open the article, you open with this amazing stat that just says, that in 2011 half of workers said they were treated uncivilly within the past week. And that rate has actually doubled since 1998. Why such a sharp rise?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Yeah, that's a great question that we get often. There seems to be a lot of potential causes. Over 60% of people, when we ask why people are uncivil say that it's because they have no time to be nice. Now we would argue that it doesn't necessarily require more time, but there's a sense that people are over-worked, and also that there's just more stress in people's lives.

And so the idea is that, whether it's because of the economy, because of dual careers, because of the fast-paced nature of not only society, but changes in the workplace, people feel a lot more stress. And I think people tend to be more on edge. And as a result, have a tendency to either be uncivil, or respond, if they feel like they're not being treated well.

So that seems to be a big cause as far as stress in our larger culture. But also, demographics, there's a sense that generations are becoming more narcissistic and focused on the self. The media, certainly with all the reality, and aggression, and so forth on TV, and other outlets, probably doesn't help the cause.

The idea is more transactional-based nature of work. So the idea of, people are switching jobs and probably see things as they don't need to build those relationships, or they don't need to be nice and civil to one another as much. But in large part, it seems like there's cause both in the workplace, as well as in society, for why incivility has increased so much.

SARAH GREEN: That is interesting. And it makes me wonder, to get ahead of it into some of the, well how do you stem that tide of incivility, , it sounds a bit like incivility begets more incivility. So that when one person is rude, you kind of want to respond with rudeness. Does that actually mirror what she found in your research?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Definitely. So one of the huge problems with incivility is that, not only do people tend to get even, oftentimes, much later down the road, so 94% of the time people will say that they get even with the offender, there are these ripple effects, where witnesses also feel it. And there's research out there to suggests that you can expect that incivility will flow— positive or negative, really— civility or incivility will flow three degrees of influence.

So people that you may not even know, may kind of catch this. And we see that happen, not only for witnesses, but customers, for example, that get the burden of incivility. And so it definitely tends to flow in ways that organizations don't necessarily track.

SARAH GREEN: Well, and I'm glad you mentioned customers, because some of the most interesting parts in the article to me we're just how negative incivility was in the bottom line. So if you're a boss who thinks, oh, by being brusque and strict with people I'm actually encouraging discipline, you may actually, if you're being what people perceive as rude, actually be really hurting your bottom line in your workforce, but also really offending some important customers. Could you just walk us through some of your findings on that?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Sure. So one of the things that we find is that employees that experience it, 25% of them say that they take it out on customers, whether or not that's intentional. So there's kind of an immediate impact on many customers.

But we've done some research and looked at the effects of customers who simply witness this. So in other words, they see an employee treating another employee disrespectfully, giving them harsh feedback, things like that, or just hearing about it, and what we found is that customers hate to see that. And in fact, a large percentage will walk away and not want to deal with the organization again.

And so it really leads to very quick generalizations, not only about that specific employee, but it generalizes to the firm, and the brand, and they simply don't want to do business with an organization that stands for that. So what we were surprised about was how

strong those effects were over a really kind of quick incident, and these loyal customers would be willing to walk away because of that.

SARAH GREEN: Tell me if I'm remembering this right, but I think you said, in one scenario with a bank, the customers who saw incivility, or overheard incivility were something like 80% less likely to do business with that bank? Am I getting that right?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Yes. So customers that witnessed incivility were four times more likely to walk away from the company. So where as 80% of customers who hadn't witnessed the incivility said they had used the firm's products and services, only 20% of people that witnessed employee incivility agreed to support the company.

SARAH GREEN: Wow. That's a really, almost shocking, rate of customer abandonment. But you know, it make sense to me. I think one of the things, though, that I found really surprising was, how incivility affected employee creativity. Because I could see some of the other findings about, well maybe people want to spend less time at work, or put in less effort if their boss or coworker is being rude to them.

I was really surprised that actually seem to shut down some of their creative capacity, as well. Can you just tell us about that experiment, and what the impact was?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Sure. So one of the more interesting things that we found was that, the effects of incivility, it's not just a story of revenge, but in fact, it seems to affect people's cognitive ability to focus and to be creative. So literally, it's not all about people trying to intentionally get even, there are these other performance and creativity losses.

So one of the things that we found in a series of experiments— so consistently found— was that people that experience, or even witness incivility, literally, it shuts their cognitive functioning down, and they don't process things as well.

So, for example, they're not able to remember things as well. And they're far less creative. And so consistently we see that people just don't process as well immediately after this. And that there are costs as a result.

SARAH GREEN: So if you're listening to this and thinking, oh, wow, incivility is really bad. I want to root it out. When you try to rectify problems of incivility in organizations, what are some of the challenges you run into that you might not have anticipated?

CHRISTINE PORATH: Well, I think one thing is making sure that the leaders who are in charge are role models. So if the leaders don't walk the talk, then there are huge problems. It can be in the company's mission statement. But if people don't see their leaders behaving civilly, it discourages people and doesn't lead to people behaving civilly.

So again, when we asked employees why they are uncivil, over 25% point to their leaders and say, because they're disrespectful. So I think it really needs to start from the top. Leaders set the tone, and so they have to model good behavior.

And part of that is, they also need to get realistic feedback about how they're perceived. Because, oftentimes, what we find is that executives may have the best of intentions, but they simply don't understand how they're being perceived.

You know we've had doctors in our classes say, until I got 360 feedback, I didn't realize the residents thought I was such a jerk. I was just treating residents how I was trained. So I think there's a sense of getting a realistic picture of not how you intend to come across, but rather how people perceive you, and then making adjustments accordingly.

SARAH GREEN: It is interesting to me how unaware people seem to be, in your article, and in your book, and in these stories, of what they're doing that's so rude to people. Because, I think all of us are probably guilty of rehashing a conversation in our mind and thinking, oh, god, I really hope I didn't offend that person. But it sounds like it's more like the things we don't think of, where we just are inadvertently blundering through the day, that actually probably have that kind of effect.

CHRISTINE PORATH: Yes. I think so. I think it's, again, probably because we're overloaded, so to speak, that we tend to forget, or we're not mindful of the fact that we're always on. And so it really takes a lot of work to kind of think about the fact that you're always affecting other people.

So trying to be mindful of that throughout the day is great. One of the neat norms that we've heard of an organization adopting is the 10/5 way. And basically, the idea is if you're within 10 feet of someone you're to acknowledge them. And if you're within five feet of them, you're to say hello. And this is at a hospital. And they've seen patient satisfaction increase dramatically, and retention, and other things.

So the idea is, even these moments where you may be off, so to speak, you want to think about your influence on others. Not only negatively, but the potential to have a positive affect on others, things like smiling, and things of that nature.

But one of the things that we try to highlight is just the idea that, civility and the success that will come out of it, really starts with you. So the organization isn't necessarily going to change overnight, but you own what you can change about yourself. And kind of starting with that in mind, and then, hopefully, building from there.

SARAH GREEN: So I have to play devil's advocate, here, just for a moment. So if you are sort of mandating that people smile at each other, or in some cases companies like Zappos, which you mentioned in the article, and other companies, have these sort of rules for engaging with fellow employees and with customers, where it seems like, is this in danger of then becoming totally inauthentic and forced? Where you're sort of forcing civility?

But you're really asking people to be always on in a way that is Orwellian, is that going too far? Or is this the kind of— in a culture where we're all sort of becoming more and more ourselves, more and more transparent, is it just to be expected that sometimes we're all going all going to lapse a little bit?

CHRISTINE PORATH: I think the real goal is to make it such a positive culture where people naturally want to behave this way. And that it is the norm where you don't see incivility. So it's not about, necessarily, forced certain behaviors, like smiling, and things like that, but rather it's fun. We enjoy each other. And we treat each other well.

And so it tends to flow a little bit more naturally. That might be tough to get going, so to speak, but some of the things that the companies that you mentioned do, that are really successful, is they hire well. They really screen people. They check their references and find out if they have a history of treating people well.

They conduct team interviews, where others get to weigh in about, are these people that we want to work with, that we think would be effective to collaborate with, and things like that? And then, potentially, investing in various training and so forth.

But I think the goal is to really to make— ideally, you're selecting people that are naturally predisposed to civility and have a positive spirit, and the like. But that ultimately, they're really enjoying, and they want to be a part of that company, and what they stand for. And they feel lucky to work for an organization that has those values, and has those type of employees that behave this way.

SARAH GREEN: And it sounded a little bit like, when you're talking about some of those efforts, that what may at first feel forced is really just like the discomfort you feel with any change initiative. And after a while you establish a new norm.

CHRISTINE PORATH: Yeah. Exactly. I think that's right.

SARAH GREEN: Well, Christine, I think that's great advice. These are really interesting findings. Thanks again, for very civilly talking with us today.

CHRISTINE PORATH: Thanks for having me.