



Whatever Happened to Civility in the Workplace?

Although I have been deeply concerned about the way people treat each other in the workplace for a long time, two recent events particularly brought the issue to mind: (1) A column written by Steve Blow in **The Dallas Morning News** (<http://www.dallasnews.com/s/dws/dn/localnews/columnists/sblow/vitindex.html>) and (2) Many comments made during the week of memorial services for former President Ronald Reagan.

Columnist Steve Blow has been around for a while and believes he has developed a pretty thick skin, but he is becoming alarmed even by the e-mails he receives (does that sound familiar to anyone?): **“People don’t want to offer a conflicting opinion; they want to inflict a wound. Snide, sarcastic, belittling, profane—you name it. The intent is to sting, not discuss.”**

Steve described former President Reagan’s funeral as such a moving event because: **“It was civil. It was like a cease-fire in the culture wars, and you wanted to bask in the moment.”** Former President Bush said in his tribute, **“Politics can be cruel, uncivil. Our friend was strong and gentle.”** President Bush referred to **“his kindly presence, that reassuring voice, the way that his convictions were always politely stated, affably argued, the way he carried himself even in the most powerful office with the decency and attention to small kindnesses that define a good life, a courtly, gentle, and considerate man, never known to slight or embarrass others.”**

What is Civility?

Although civility has often been thought of as rules of etiquette, civility has to do with treating other people in a sensible, understanding manner, regardless of position, cultivating respect, building good relationships, making others feel comfortable, being mindful of the dignity of all human beings, and not demeaning people in any way.

Incivility includes physical, verbal, and nonverbal behavior that violates the standards of communication and cooperation that

make the workplace (and the world) a safe, pleasant, and productive environment for everyone. (See “Examples of Incivility in the Workplace” and “Examples of Civility in the Workplace” at <http://www.melbabenson.com/articles.php>).

How Did We Get to This Point?

Two of the generational groups discussed in last month’s e-newsletter, Veterans (now age 61 and over) and Boomers (now age 44-61), were taught civility and accountability as they were growing up. Unfortunately, many in the generations that followed were raised with a great deal more permissiveness and grew up without learning much about manners and civility. In my encounters with clients, I find that even generations who were taught civility don’t always practice it.

In her book, **Rude Awakenings**, Giovinella Gonthier, points to other factors that are affecting people’s behavior today. (See “Ten Reasons Why We Behave Uncivilly” at <http://www.melbabenson.com/articles.php>).

What Is the Impact in the Workplace?

1. Declining staff morale, which can lead to:
 - Employees taking out the frustrations they are experiencing in the organization on clients and customers.
 - Increased illness and absenteeism, accidents and mistakes, plummeting productivity, and costly employee turnover.
2. Lawsuits and negative publicity. (See a description of a landmark case in “Incivility in the Workplace: Lawsuits and Negative Publicity” at <http://melbabenson.com/articles.php>).

Workplace incivility diminishes the effectiveness of the entire organization. As we face ever increasing challenges in our personal and professional lives, wouldn’t we all be better off if we could at least be civil to each other? (See “What Can Be Done About Incivility in the Workplace” at <http://melbabenson.com/articles.php>).

“Rudeness is the weak man’s imitation of strength.”

- Eric Hoffer

“Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.”

- George Washington

“A crucial measure of our success in life is the way we treat one another every day of our lives. When we lessen the burden of living for those around us, we are doing well. When we add to the misery of the world, we are not.”

- **Choosing Civility**, by P.M. Forni

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