

# **What Can Be Done About Incivility in the Workplace?**

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## **Employment Practices Liability Insurance**

Employment practices liability insurance, which was unheard of before the 1990's, has seen tremendous growth over the past ten years because of:

- Laws protecting people against various types of harassment.
- Increasing employee awareness of their rights.

Insurance of this type would be unnecessary if organizations cultivated more civil environments with better working conditions.

## **What Other Countries Are Doing**

Workplace incivility, particularly persistent and emotionally distressing behavior known as bullying, is receiving more attention in Europe than in the United States.

In her book, **Rude Awakenings**, Giovinella Gonthier reports that Sweden outlawed bullying in the workplace in 1993.

France has labeled such behavior "psychological/moral harassment," and in June 2001 passed a bill making bullying in the workplace punishable by a prison sentence of up to one year and a fine of \$13,000.

France also recognizes health disorders caused by incivility as industrial illnesses eligible for assistance under the health system.

## **What We Can Do**

Without respect for others being taught in the home, children go into the world and then into the workplace without an understanding of civility.

Leaders who are actively disliked have a difficult time getting others to follow them. Arrogance and rudeness are unnecessary and unproductive.

For an organization to reach its goals, everyone must learn to be considerate and civil to each other and to external customers.

**Two ways organizations are coping with the issue of incivility in the workplace are:**

1. Offering training or individual coaching.
2. Establishing Codes of Conduct.

**Examples from the Codes of Conduct some of my clients have developed are:**

1. Listen with an open mind when others are speaking, and respond honestly and respectfully, even to those you don't particularly care for personally.
2. Think before responding, and never escalate anger.
3. Assume positive intentions. Don't automatically take things personally, jump to conclusions, or overreact.
4. Create an environment in which all members of the team are encouraged to:
  - Draw on their professional and personal experiences and strengths.
  - Contribute their ideas, opinions, suggestions, and concerns.
  - Admit mistakes and move on.
5. Avoid negative body language, and use a respectful tone of voice in communicating with others.
6. Be aware of deadlines you must meet, and be responsible for meeting them. If it appears that a deadline cannot be met, inform those affected as soon as you are aware of the problem.
7. Recognize that interpersonal conflict is a tremendous drain on everyone's time and emotions. Resolve conflicts as quickly as possible, forgive, and move on.
8. Once a decision is made, accept it and move forward.
9. Leave past issues in the past in order for the organization to move forward.
10. Recognize that everyone's time is valuable. Be on time for work, meetings, appointments, etc.
11. Gossip, complaining, and derogatory comments about others are not professional conduct and will not be tolerated.
12. Ask yourself how important any given situation really is. Often anger is over trivial matters.
13. Ask yourself what, if anything, you might be doing to make things worse.

## **Confronting and Changing Work Behavior**

The disruption caused by the behavior of an individual employee, supervisor, or manager may outweigh the contribution he/she makes to the organization.

Since most people don't like confrontation, problem behavior is often ignored and usually gets worse with the passage of time. The sooner problems are addressed, the better for everyone concerned.

Before talking with a person about his/her behavior:

### **1. Identify what you want.**

Defining what you want ahead of time can help you avoid confronting people just to make a point, prove yourself right, or punish the other person.

### **2. Focus on the present and the future.**

Past events must usually be described to begin problem solving, but changing the past is impossible.

Dwelling on the past instead of focusing on the present and the future tends to lead all those involved to defend their positions and consider the discussion a personal attack instead of an attempt to solve the problem.

Or, as we often discuss in classes, we need to avoid the tendency to attack the person and focus instead on solving the problem.

For example: "Mistakes like this can't happen any more. What can we do to keep it from happening again?"

### **Steps to Take When Confronting a Person**

**1. Approach the person in a friendly but firm manner.**

“There is something I need to talk to you about.”

**2. Describe the problem specifically.**

“We need you to reduce the number of personal phone calls.”

If you talk to someone about a bad attitude, describe what he/she is doing that shows a bad attitude and what he/she can do differently.

**3. Explain your concern.**

“When you come in late, others think they can be late.”

Focus on how the person’s behavior has an impact on the department and/or the organization. Make the person aware of rules and how the behavior will affect his/her career.

**4. Describe what he/she contributes to the department and/or organization.**

“We need you. Here are your strong points.”

**5. Ask for his/her view.**

“What is going on with these phone calls?”

**6. Summarize his/her view and acknowledge.**

“So you feel that...”

**7. Clarify your expectations and describe the consequences.**

“We need you to be here, and this could affect your career. We may have to take further action which could lead to the end of your career here.”

**8. Ask for input and agree on a solution.**

“What are your ideas on how to fix this situation?”

“We want to keep you as a member of our team. Here’s what you will need to do.”

**9. Follow up.**

Set a date and follow up, usually within ten days. If the solution agreed upon is working, acknowledge the person’s changed behavior. If you are truly serious about the behavior change, follow up with zero tolerance.