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Upfront

**So Uncivilized: Rudeness, sarcasm, and disrespect undermine
employee productivity. By Shirley Wang**

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So Uncivilized

Rudeness, sarcasm, and disrespect undermine employee productivity

When Jennifer Chang, a program coordinator at a nonprofit youth mentoring organization, sat down for her annual performance evaluation last month, she asked for a raise. Having been on the job for two years and friendly with her supervisor, Chang expected an open discussion.

Instead, her supervisor replied, "People have goals when they come into a position, and if after a certain period of time they haven't reached them, they should look elsewhere," recalls Chang, which she heard as "If you don't like your salary, then leave."

Shocked by her supervisor's rudeness, Chang has since been pondering an exit – a move she had never considered before that conversation.

Such seemingly slight, negative experiences, called incivilities, can profoundly reduce employees' happiness, motivation, creativity, and productivity, report Christine M. Pearson of Thunderbird, the Garvin School of International Management, and Christine L. Porath of the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. Their article appears in the February 2005 issue of the *Academy of Management Executive*.

Using focus groups, interviews, and surveys, the authors find that more than 20 percent of employees report experiencing incivilities such as rudeness and sarcasm at least once a week – in nonprofit and for-profit organizations alike. In two-thirds of the cases, the instigator is in a higher position than the victim. Half of the employees who experience uncivil behavior will think about leaving their jobs – like Chang – and one in eight



"This is bad work, Edwards! Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!"

will actually quit. The cost of each job turnover averages \$50,000 per exiting employee, report the authors. In addition, managers spend as much as 13 percent of their time – the equivalent of seven weeks – resolving such conflicts among employees.

"This is real, and worth attention from practitioners and scholars alike," said Heidi Brooks, an expert in executive leadership development and a lecturer at the Yale School of Management. "[Incivility] suggests not only that we are not in this together, but also that I don't really care about my impact on you."

And when an organization fails to curtail the behavior, employees may respond by being uncivil themselves. For example, Porath and colleagues found that lower-status employees tend to retaliate through covert actions, like reducing effort (up to 25

percent of victims intentionally cut back), sabotaging work, and even stealing paper clips. In addition, verbal aggression may spiral into more direct – even physical – aggression.

"Historically, managers didn't pay attention because legally they don't have to," says Porath. Because it's unclear whether uncivil behavior is meant to be hurtful or not – the perception is in the eye of the victim – employees are often reluctant to bring it up with the offender or the organization. Instigators can claim their incivilities were meant as jokes. And victims are afraid of being told just to develop "a tougher skin," says Porath.

But considering the cost of incivility to organizations, says Porath, they should try to curtail it. "Many solutions really don't cost much," she adds. For example, setting no-toler-

ance expectations about worker-to-worker incivility; teaching skills such as conflict resolution, stress management, and listening; and reacting swiftly to transgressions are all things organizations can do to curb incivility. Also, getting “360-degree feedback,” or anonymous input from workers of all levels, improves the accuracy of feedback about all employees. Finally, if employees do leave, delaying their exit interviews may allow them to report their real reasons for leaving the organization.

As for Chang, what does she think her supervisor could have done to avoid incivility? “She could have heard more about what I was saying,” she says. —Shirley Wang

No Market for Marketing

Nonprofits do not use – and often don’t want – for-profit marketing techniques

When the Center to Advance Palliative Care was founded in 2001, Sharyn Sutton, then a consultant to the center, used her corporate public relations knowledge to resolve one of the group’s biggest tensions: While activists had long focused on improving “end-of-life” care, neither patients nor their doctors wanted to see patients as “dying.”

By branding pain management and quality-of-life enhancement as

“palliative” rather than “end-of-life” medicine, the group rapidly advanced its agenda. In 2003 alone, the number of hospital-based palliative care programs increased by 22 percent, says the American Hospital Association.

But the nonprofit world usually does not make such good use of marketing techniques like branding, reports a study in the Summer 2005 *California Management Review*. The



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