

The Toxic Continuum From Incivility to Violence: What Can HRD Do?

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Abstract

The frequency, intensity, and duration of uncivil behavior should be a concern to leaders in any organization. All too often seemingly isolated, subtle uncivil incidents (e.g., instigating a joke) can lead to patterns of uncivil behavior (e.g., bullying) and even physical violence. Each is a form of aggressive behavior. Inasmuch as uncivil behavior is linked to poorer individual- (e.g., job performance) and organizational-level (e.g., costs) outcomes, human resource development (HRD) is increasingly being called to implement useful strategies for dealing effectively with this vital workplace issue. The article traces the more subtle forms of uncivil behavior that tend to be ambiguous in intent to more intentional forms of uncivil behavior, that is, bullying and physical violence. The article suggests that HRD can make a strong, positive contribution to reducing the likelihood of uncivil behaviors, which in turn can play a meaningful role in increasing the success of the organization. Finally, a summary of the eight articles are presented that comprise this issue.

Keywords

incivility, bullying, physical violence, aggression, HRD practice

Workplace incivility and violence are growing challenges for human resource development (HRD) professionals. The occurrence of uncivil or violent behavior at work

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results in hostile work environments that are not conducive to employee learning and development (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Andersson and Pearson (1999) define workplace incivility as “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457). Incivility has negative influences on those who witness uncivil behavior toward others or the organization as well as those who directly experience uncivil encounters at work (Montgomery, Kane, & Vance, 2004). When incivility is not addressed and prevented in workplaces, there is opportunity of it escalating to aggressive forms of workplace abusive behavior such as workplace violence (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Porath & Erez, 2007). Workplace violence is defined by the U.S. Department of Justice (2003) as “any form of conduct that intentionally creates anxiety, fear and a climate of distrust in the workplace” (p. 19). The types of workplace violence noted by the U.S. Department of Justice include incidents of homicide, rape, assaults, stalking, threats, harassment (e.g., sexual harassment), physical/emotional abuse, bullying, kidnapping, extortion, theft/robbery, terrorist activity, and mass murders (Jacobs & Scott, 2009). Mass murders on the job by disgruntled employees have become media-intensive events. However,

. . . these mass murders, while serious, are relatively infrequent events. It is the threats, harassment, bullying, stalking, emotional abuse, intimidation, and other forms of behavior and physical violence that, if left unchecked, may result in more serious violent behavior. These are the behaviors that supervisors and managers have to deal with every day. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003, p. 6)

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), there were more than 1.7 million violent victimizations committed yearly in the workplace between 1993 and 1999 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). Current statistics predict that one in four people are likely to be affected by acts of workplace violence in organizations (Levick, 1996).

Organizational scholars have noted numerous detrimental outcomes of workplace incivility and violence. An uncivil work environment may lead to poor employee health, low job satisfaction, low organizational productivity and commitment, high employee turnover, and poor application of learning at work (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007; Reio & Ghosh, 2009). Moreover, workplace violence has far reaching negative consequences related to employee health and safety at work. In 1992, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) declared workplace homicide as a serious public health epidemic requiring priority attention by policy makers (Jacobs & Porter, 1999). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, 2002) designated workplace violence as an occupational health hazard.

In addition, uncivil and violent workplace behaviors carry financial costs as well. Researchers estimate that the costs associated with abuse in the workplace (e.g., costs for absenteeism, turnover, legal actions, and reduced productivity) can range from

US\$17,000 to US\$24,000 for every severe case leading to an approximate total cost of US\$23.8 billion on an annual basis for 1.4 million employees who are regularly abused at work (Sheehan, McCarthy, Barker, & Henderson, 2001; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). Stress-related illness due to workplace bullying, a related construct, was recently estimated to cost organizations in the United Kingdom about 1.3 billion euros annually (Yeung & Griffin, 2008). Studies show that yearly workplace violence results in hundreds of deaths, more than 2 million injuries, and billions of dollars in costs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1994, 2003; Castillo & Jenkins, 1994). With the average out-of-court settlement of US\$500,000 and an average US\$3 million jury award, employers face several sources of potential legal liability in efforts to prevent workplace violence (Brakel, 1998; Levin, 1996). Consideration must be given to the fact that these costs are in regard to the crimes mandated to be reported to the government (i.e., homicide, rape, robbery, assault with injury) and those falling within the guidelines of specific harassment laws. Due to underreporting of incidents as well as a failure to file compensation claims, the data available may represent only a fraction of workplace incidents. "According to the Department of Justice, nearly six in ten cases of harassment and one in four physical assaults never get reported to management" (Jossi, 1999, p. 36).

Given detrimental consequences and insidious natures of abusive behaviors that are often not reported, it is imperative that HRD professionals take a proactive role in addressing and managing the occurrences of any kind of abusive behavior in the workplace. There has been scant HRD research providing knowledge about how best to do so. The integrative literature review on the topic of workplace incivility by Estes and Wang (2008) indicated that the phenomenon of uncivil workplace behavior has been largely overlooked by the field of HRD. Such oversight of subtle forms of abusive behavior at work can encourage an uncivil work environment where no one is held accountable for their rude behaviors and employees can take advantage of this free reign by engaging in more hostile acts of workplace violence. Cutting-edge research on these topics could lead to better understandings of the nature, antecedents, and outcomes of workplace incivility and violence, providing HRD professionals useful leverage points to reducing the likelihood of such behavior at work.

Purpose of the Issue

The purpose of this issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources* is to inform HRD scholars and practitioners on matters related to workplace incivility and violence at work and to introduce and discuss HRD implications for creating a healthy work environment. The authors of the articles included in this issue apply diverse theoretical lenses (e.g., critical theory in Article 1, affective events theory in Article 2, workplace diversity framework in Article 3, frustration-aggression theory in Article 4, workplace aggression theory in Article 6, constructivist framework in Article 7, and theory of awareness development in Article 8) to explain the phenomenon of incivility and violence instigated and experienced by different actors in organizations (e.g.,

organizational members having varying degrees of power in Article 1, employees belonging to minority groups addressed in Articles 3 and 6, supervisors and coworkers in Article 4, mentors and protégés in Article 2). Workplace violence is a gradual phenomenon that builds over a period of time; the sequence of articles in this issue parallels this escalation by discussing the roots of the phenomenon through tracing the escalation of subtle uncivil behaviors at work to aggressive acts, concluding with insights on workplace bullying and violence. The underlying intent is to explain how workplace incivility and violence represent two ends of a continuum with workplace bullying falling somewhere in the middle.

Workplace incivility as the root construct and genesis of the continuum leading to aggressive acts of bullying and violence invites clarification of what constitutes incivility. Although the articles included in this issue have drawn from different definitions of workplace incivility in the literature, the range of definitions have the following commonalities: incivility is a form of deviant behavior that violates norms of mutual respect, is low intensity, and ambiguous (e.g., neglecting to say thank you please, sending snippy emails, giving silent treatment by avoiding or ignoring someone, dropping trash on the floor and leaving it for the maintenance staff to clear, leaving the copier jammed, ridiculing someone's ideas openly, shouting at others). Emphasis is placed on gaining a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon by considering both traditional and critical perspectives. Unlike traditional perspectives, critical perspective derives its origin from critical theory that challenges established knowledge and historical interpretation of a phenomenon. Whereas traditional perspectives on workplace incivility and violence can help in understanding the extant literature on this topic and its implications for HRD, critical perspectives allow identification of unique ways to address workplace incivility and its potential to escalate to workplace violence through the development of novel theoretical frameworks and the design of innovative interventions grounded in HRD research. Overall, the balance between conceptual and empirical papers spanning the continuum of workplace incivility, bullying, and violence allow this special issue to make a distinctive contribution enhancing HRD research and practice on this vital topic.

Contribution of Articles

The first article by Jamie Callahan applies a critical perspective examining the topic of uncivil behavior in the workplace presenting a framework that conceptualizes incivility as a dissonance fostering individual and organizational change. In doing so, she explains how power biases can be inherent in organizational interpretations of "incivility" and cautions HRD professionals that moderating all emotions labeled as *uncivil* may disrupt organizational change. The second article by Rajashi Ghosh, Sunda Dierkes, and Salvatore Falletta applies affective events theory to explore instances of incivility motivated by power differences between the mentor-protégé pair in organizations. Their findings promise to guide HRD's strategic role in building stronger foundations for formal mentoring programs through designing of

training and counseling services that can address uncivil behaviors instigated by either the mentor or the protégé. The third article by Rod Githens explores the role of deeply held prejudices as probable causes of workplace incivility and emphasizes HRD's role in promoting workplace diversity to combat subtle acts of discrimination at work. The fourth article by Thomas Reio tests a variation of Fox and Spector's (1999) work-frustration aggression model to inform HRD scholars and practitioners about some antecedents and consequences of different types of incivility (e.g., supervisor incivility, coworker incivility) and recommends interventions for addressing incivility in organizations.

The fifth article by James Bartlett and Michelle Bartlett presents an integrative literature review on the topic of workplace bullying, a more obvious form of workplace abusive behavior. This review identifies the different types and the individual and organizational impacts of workplace bullying and guides HRD professionals in designing interventions aimed at minimizing bullying at work. The sixth article by Judy Jacobs and Chaunda Scott discusses the nature and related consequences of hate crimes in the workplace, a specific type of workplace violence and HRD's role in the mitigation of organizational risk associated with such crimes. In doing so, their article completes the continuum tracing the escalation of workplace incivility and bullying to workplace violence, the most aggressive form of workplace abuse. The seventh article by Brian Vivona and Rey Ty challenges HRD professionals to address the aftermaths of traumatic deaths in the workplace that may result from workplace violence. Despite different HRD interventions, workplace violence will not disappear overnight, and hence, HRD professionals need to prepare for addressing its worst consequences. Finally, the eighth article by Martin Kormanik concludes this special issue by explaining how awareness of workplace violence at different levels of an organization (i.e., senior management, first-line supervisors, and rank-and-file employees) can guide HRD professionals in planning appropriate interventions to combat its occurrence in workplaces. By conducting an exploratory study that captures the overall status of individual and organizational awareness on the issue of violence from sampled participants, they provide preliminary evidence in support of a novel theoretical framework (e.g., Cycle of Awareness Development [CAD]) in understanding discrete perceptions of workplace violence.

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Bios

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