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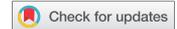Check for updates

Incivility and Beyond at the Top Management Team Level

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ABSTRACT

Although incivility has been gaining increasing attention in the literature as well as in the industry, academic studies have not examined the effects on top management team (TMT) members. TMT members are different from employees at other levels because they are officers of their organizations who are held to a much higher level of responsibility than those in lower echelons. They are crucial in setting the norms of an organization and have far-reaching influence. This article seeks to uncover the mechanisms that explain what happens when TMT members are targets of uncivil leadership behavior. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 TMT members. Findings suggest that TMT members tended to be analytical in their reactions, influencing their responses. This study contributes to the literature on incivility and leadership, filling the gap of addressing such behavior at the TMT level.

Introduction

Uncivil leadership behavior is unfortunately very common in modern organizations. Incivility in organizations has affected about 98% of the workforce, with the trend increasing significantly since the late 1990s (Porath & Pearson, 2013). This rising trend highlights the importance of evaluating the effects of incivility on the workforce. Leadership behavior has a significant impact on workplace incivility (Harold & Holtz, 2015). To help us examine a broader range of concepts regarding leadership incivility, we extend earlier definitions of uncivil behavior. In conceptualizing our study of uncivil leadership behaviors, we incorporate elements associated with general incivility and social undermining (Hershcovis, 2011), characterizing uncivil leadership behavior as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457).

The source of incivility may be a major factor in influencing how uncivil behavior is perceived and the effects it has. When uncivil behavior is exhibited by leaders, it has the most severe consequences for subordinates, but it also affects others in the organization (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016). Thus, it is crucial to better understand the effects of uncivil leadership behaviors exhibited by executives because the consequences are far-reaching. However, while there has been an increasing interest in examining incivility in the workplace (Porath & Pearson, 2013), it has not been examined at the level of the top management team (TMT). In this study, TMT refers to the chief executive officer (CEO), or president, or an executive who directly reports to one of these positions (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004). The higher the level of the leader, the more influence the leader is likely to have on the behavior of others in the organization by setting policies, addressing incivility-related issues, dealing with conflict, and leading by example.

In the field, uncivil leadership behaviors exhibited by TMT members are often the subject of intense publicity. For example, the uncivil leadership behavior of Steve Jobs and its effects on his TMT have been criticized in numerous books, many articles, and a handful of motion pictures. At one point, Jobs tried to create division at Apple by consistently downplaying the importance of one of the company's key divisions—Apple II Computer. "Jobs consistently downplayed that division's importance … telling marketing managers for Apple II that they worked for an outdated, clumsy organization." Jobs's actions resulted in morale problems and partially contributed to his later departure from the company (Conger, 1990, p. 53). Industry leaders, employees, media, and others have frequently tried to uncover the way that Steve Jobs's incivility in dealing with his subordinates worked and how it has

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influenced them. No conclusive findings have been identified. More generally, rather than focus on TMT, studies of incivility have largely addressed effects on the workforce, including groups such as nurses, department-store employees, customer service employees, military personnel, court workers, banking employees, property management employees, university employees, and working students (Schilpzand et al., 2016). The literature lacks studies focused specifically on uncivil leaders at the upper echelons and their effects on an organization. We address this gap in the literature in this study.

Given the growing occurrence of incivility across various levels of an organization, and the far-reaching effects of behaviors among top executives, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature related to the effects of incivility at the TMT level. We investigated the effects of incivility on TMT members and the coping strategies they use to reduce the effects of incivility. Additionally, we examined the relationships between leaders who are uncivil and their subordinates to expand our understanding of what happens when TMT members are targets. Our sample comprises 15 TMT members. While quite small, given the difficulties associated with access to leaders at the top echelons of companies, our sample provides an opportunity to better understand the dynamics associated with the TMT, which frequently have important implications for organizations.

Our article also contributes to the literature by further expanding the understanding of the effects of uncivil leadership behavior. We address TMT members' reactions to such leadership and examine leader–member interactions with TMT subordinates and the resulting effects on TMT leadership style. Further, we examine factors related to the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of those who have achieved TMT status. Their unique qualities may contribute to their resilience in dealing with incivility and may have important implications for how others in the company react to uncivil leadership behavior.

Theoretical background

Top management team (TMT)

There has been a lot focus on TMT members in academia and practice because of the extent of their influence throughout the organization. Scholars have studied uncivil leadership behaviors (Schilpzand et al., 2016) but not at the TMT level. In contrast to TMT leaders like Steve Jobs and the notoriety he received for his incivility, many top-level leaders who dominate their

organizations use an uncivil leadership style without gaining much publicity. However, their leadership results in a number of workplace and psychological issues (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

It is important to increase our understanding of how TMT members handle incivility for various reasons. First, expressions of incivility by a TMT member may influence how other TMT members and lower level employees behave. Second, depending on how TMT members address the incivility, further incidents of incivility may be deterred or they may continue to occur (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Additionally, ripple effects throughout the organization may be prevented. Third, insight gained into the characteristics that enable TMT members (who constitute a small minority of the working population) to achieve and maintain TMT status, despite barriers they have encountered, including dealing with uncivil leaders, is helpful. In summary, considering the power and influence that a TMT in an organization has, it is critical to understand the effects of uncivil leadership at the TMT level, how members react to incivility, the effects it has on their management style and interactions with subordinates, and the characteristics that TMT members tend to possess.

Descriptions of uncivil leadership

We differentiate leadership incivility from abusive leadership, which is a significantly more intense and destructive leadership behavior. Abusive leadership is defined as "a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence" (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013, p. 1310). While our primary focus is on examining uncivil leadership behaviors, we follow the general approach of Hershcovis, who called for less construct differentiation between abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, social undermining, and interpersonal conflict because she characterized these negative behaviors as general workplace aggression (Hershcovis, 2011). Further, in support of her position, Hershcovis pointed out that the effects of such workplace aggression are similar.

Incivility has been characterized by a wide range of descriptive behaviors, including taking credit for others' work, talking down to others, not listening, spreading rumors, belittling others, making demeaning or derogatory comments, throwing temper tantrums (Pearson & Porath, 2009), and exhibiting disrespectful, condescending, and degrading behaviors (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). It also includes less overt behaviors, such as interrupting a speaker, being rude, excluding others, and gossiping (Schilpzand et al.,

2016). Rude behaviors such as gossiping, making cat-calls, sending nasty e-mails, and engaging in public undermining result in lower morale and higher absenteeism (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). Other negative effects of rudeness in the workplace include lower corporate performance and profits (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000) and less helpfulness and lower performance by the affected employees (Porath & Erez, 2007).

Johnson and Indvik (2001) view behavior in the workplace as a continuum, with high performance and intrinsic motivation at one end and workplace violence, sabotage, and theft at the other. While not as negative as some of these behaviors in the workplace, incivility has important implications. Cortina and Magley (2009) considered workplace harassment, injustice, bullying, and abuse as constructs related to incivility. Their work shows that a target's appraisal of incivility depends on the duration of the behavior and the organizational position of the perpetrator. Behavior exhibited for longer periods of time by those in powerful positions was regarded as more serious than those of lesser positions for short durations, highlighting the importance of examining the effects of incivility among the top echelons of leaders of an organization.

Source of incivility

The source of the uncivil behavior matters. In a study of Singapore employees, Lim and Lee (2011) found perceptions of incivility to be related to the level of the uncivil leader in the organizational hierarchy. Specifically, employees reported the most incidents of uncivil behavior by supervisors, followed by peers and then subordinates. Younger employees reported experiencing more incidents of incivility than older employees, and men reported experiencing more incidents than women (Lim & Lee, 2011).

The source of incivility may influence how it is perceived and the effects it has on its targets. While uncivil leadership at any level is likely to have adverse effects, the effects may be exacerbated if the uncivil leader engaging in such behavior is at the top of the organization since the leader's behavior is likely to have far-reaching effects on the entire organization. In a study examining incivility among undergraduates at a Midwestern university, rudeness was perceived differently depending on who exhibited the uncivil behavior (Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2015). Specifically, the study found that when a supervisor was uncivil, the behavior was perceived as more appalling than when a co-worker or customer was uncivil. TMT members play a crucial role in setting an example and controlling many aspects of their subordinates' behaviors, including those at lower hierarchical levels. Thus, it is important to gain insight into what happens when incivility occurs at the highest levels of an organization.

Studies show that both employees and organizations suffer from exposure to incivility (Cortina et al., 2001; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Schilpzand et al., 2016). However, none of these studies specifically researched incivility within the TMT ranks of organizations. For example, the incivility surveys conducted by Cortina et al. (2001) included some managerial employees but did not specifically address uncivil behavior within the TMT level.

Effects of incivility

Given the secrecy surrounding activity at the top echelons of organizations, research on the effects of incivility at the TMT level has been scant. Instead, the effects of uncivil behavior have been mostly studied within specific groups at lower levels of the organization. For example, while some studies limited their research of incivility to female victims (Lim & Cortina, 2005), other studies focused on volunteers in a training course (Reio & Ghosh, 2009), federal court employees (Cortina et al., 2001), or specific professions such as nurses (Leiter, Price, & Laschinger, 2010).

Barker Caza and Cortina (2007) studied the reactions of employed undergraduate students to uncivil behavior by those of higher and equal status. Incivility by employees of both statuses generated feelings of ostracism and distress in the students and caused them to disengage, while incivility by those of higher status caused the students to perceive the incivility as unjust. A 2005 study of employed students by Penney and Spector found that victims of incivility have less job satisfaction than nonvictims and engage in counterproductive workplace behaviors. Porath and Erez's (2007) study of students found that incivility diminished workplace performance. A 2008 study of MBA and undergraduate students (Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson) found that higher status males respond more aggressively than lower status males or females to incivility, while low-status females are more likely than other employees of either sex to adopt a strategy of avoidance. A study of property management employees and students (Miner, Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Brady, 2012) found that there is a positive relationship between uncivil experiences and job stress and depression. In a study of employed MBA students, Porath and Pearson (2012) found that there is a positive relationship between incivility and its victims experiencing fear and anger, having a high rate of absenteeism from work, and having intentions to exit the organization.

A study of bank tellers by Sliter, Sliter, and Jex (2012) found a positive relationship between co-worker and customer incivility and absenteeism. Victims of incivility adjust their responses to incivility by weighing the degree of incivility, their status in the organization, and the consequences of their responses. Victims of higher status were much less apt to be absent than those of lower status (Sliter et al., 2012).

The extent of perceived victimization may also be influenced by company events. In a private Belgian company, white- and blue-collar bullying victims felt a greater sense of victimization if they also felt disadvantaged by a company change (Baillien & De Witte, 2009). This suggests that TMT reactions to uncivil leadership can have important consequences for subordinates at different levels of a hierarchy because the executives at the top level have the power to influence company-wide changes.

Coping with incivility

Given the executive status of TMT members, which attests to their ability to overcome many barriers, it is important to understand how these leaders cope with incivility. Scant attention has been paid to coping mechanisms of targets of uncivil leadership. In a survey of a wide range of participants including university administrators, public administrators, managers and employees from various industries, and employed students, five methods of coping with interpersonal conflict between supervisors and subordinates were identified: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim & Magner, 1995). Although the analysis of the survey results robustly discussed coping mechanisms, it did not specifically address TMT members. It is therefore not known whether TMT members would avail themselves of these mechanisms to cope with incivility.

In certain positions in the workplace, emotional regulation is required to portray the behavior expected by the organization (Grandey, 2000). However, such emotional regulation can create stress if it is too much for the individual to bear. In a survey of university employees, court employees, and attorneys, victims of incivility reported using coping mechanisms that included seeking support, prosocially avoiding conflict with the instigator, confronting the instigator, minimizing the incident, and detachment (Cortina & Magley, 2009). A study of supervisory and peer Chinese employees conducted by Chen et al. (2013) found that work engagement, particularly by those who are narcissistic, moderates the negative relationship between incivility and performance. The work of Miner et al.

(2012) found that organizational and personal support help mitigate the negative emotional results of incivility on the job. Organizational commitment and job conscientiousness were also found to mitigate the effects of incivility in a study of working undergraduate students conducted by Taylor, Bedeian, and Kluemper (2012).

To prevent employees from suffering the negative effects of uncivil leadership, it is important to understand the effects from the top echelons of leadership in a company. It is also crucial to study how top-level executives cope and react to uncivil leadership behavior and how they address it to protect lower echelons of employees from suffering the ill effects of incivility. Therefore, it is important to understand the reactions and coping mechanisms of TMT members. We propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of uncivil leadership behaviors on TMT members?

RQ2: How do targets of incivility at the TMT level react to uncivil leadership behavior?

RQ3: How do TMT members attempt to moderate the trickle-down effects of incivility on their subordinates?

Methods

We recruited 15 TMT executives for our sample through personal referrals, using a rigorous search process. As mentioned earlier, we selected executives who had achieved the title of CEO or president, or those in a position directly reporting to these two positions. The executives had a minimum of 5 years of experience in their positions and worked for companies with a minimum of 250 employees. Many had broad ranges of experience in companies ranging from 250 to more than 200,000 employees. Five TMT executives declined to participate due to concerns about privacy, despite a guarantee of anonymity. One of the authors met with the participants for more than 2 months in 2015 to conduct interviews. Nine of the interviews were face-to-face and six were conducted over the phone due to geographical distance.

Work experience of the group ranged from 20 years to more than 35 years, with the average being about 30 years. The executives who were interviewed worked for multiple organizations with an average of six organizations in a variety of industries categorized into financial services, media, and manufacturing. Specifically, the industries included banking, food, beverages, steel, various manufacturing, financial services,

mechanical services, pipeline, and media. Two-thirds held advanced degrees, with the MBA being the most common. The remainder held bachelor's degrees. The participants were all male. Four were between the ages of 45 and 50 years, while the other 11 were 50 years of age or over. All but one of the participants, who was a minority, were white males. While the majority of work experience of all of the executives was in the United States, several had significant international assignments during their careers. A summary of the participants is presented in Table 1. The names of all participants are masked to protect confidentiality.

There are generational differences as to what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable incivility. A study conducted by Leiter et al. (2010) found that Baby Boomers reported fewer incidents of incivility than Generation X (Gen X) employees. Considering that the participants in our sample were all executives at the TMT level, all male, and all over the age of 40, it is likely that they only considered the more severe instances of incivility to be uncivil. Cultural backgrounds may have also influenced what a TMT member considered uncivil. Four of the TMT participants were not born in the United States but came to the United States as adults. Thus, their formative years were in countries where equal treatment and courtesy to all may not have been the cultural norm or expectation. Rather, class status and elitism in other cultures may have influenced their perception of what constitutes uncivil behavior, particularly by someone of superior rank. The uncivil leaders that our all-male sample discussed in the interviews were all males except for two females. Since the literature indicates that females report more incidents of incivility than males in the United States (Cortina et al., 2001), some lesser amount of incivility than what actually occurred may have been recounted, given the all-male makeup of the sample.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 15 TMT executives from for-profit companies. At the beginning of each interview, we introduced the participants to the following descriptions of uncivil behavior: "Low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457) and "Volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by … employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behavior" (Krasikova et al., 2013, p. 1310). The interviews continued as we asked the participants to describe any experiences during their TMT careers that were similar to the descriptions of leadership behavior we defined. For each experience described, we encouraged the participants to provide as much detail as possible regarding the behavior, their reaction to it, how they coped with it, how it affected their interactions with subordinates, and, finally, how such behavior influenced their own management style, including how they have helped others when the uncivil leadership behavior was an issue.

We recorded and transcribed the interviews. The average interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The more than 400 minutes of interviews that we recorded resulted in 147 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. After reading the transcripts, we created a list of codes. We coded the transcriptions for each TMT member and analyzed them in a systematic manner. To answer our research questions, we employed qualitative research methods using the investigative approach and the underlying principles of grounded theory, allowing theoretical insights to emerge from our data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Walsh et al., 2015).

Table 1. Participant data.

Participant	Status	TMT years of tenure	Age group (years)	Degree	Industry	U.S. born	Number of uncivil leader encounters
Abe	CEO	>20	>60	MBA	Financial services and manufacturing	Yes	5
Ben	CEO	>20	51–60	MBA	Media	Yes	1
Chuck	CEO	>20	51–60	BS	Manufacturing	Yes	0
Doug	CEO	10–15	40–50	BA	Media	Yes	1
Ed	CEO	10–15	40–50	MS	Manufacturing	No	2
Fedor	CEO	5–10	>60	MBA	Manufacturing	Yes	1
Greg	TMT	>20	>60	JD/MBA	Financial services	Yes	1
Henry	TMT	>20	51–60	MBA	Financial services and manufacturing	Yes	1
Ian	TMT	15–20	40–50	BA	Media	No	2
Jack	TMT	10–15	>60	MS	Financial services and manufacturing	Yes	3
Ken	TMT	5–10	>60	PHD	Manufacturing	Yes	1
Larry	TMT	5–10	51–60	BS	Manufacturing	No	1
Mark	TMT	5–10	51–60	BS	Manufacturing	No	1
Ned	TMT	5–10	51–60	BS	Manufacturing	Yes	1
Oliver	TMT	5–10	40–50	MBA	Manufacturing	Yes	2

We analyzed the data by coding and identifying responses, reactions, the effects of uncivil leadership behavior on the TMT member's management style, and subordinate interactions. We then went back to the transcripts and, as part of an iterative process, we applied codes from the coding list, which enabled us to identify the effects of uncivil leadership behavior on TMT members and the corresponding reactions they exhibited. Further, we assigned experiences to types of uncivil behavior, and then we proceeded to assign corresponding responses to each type of uncivil behavior. We also connected these to interactions with subordinates, where applicable, and noted the effects of uncivil leadership behavior on followers.

Findings

Incivility experienced

Fourteen out of the 15 participants experienced at least one instance of uncivil leadership behavior firsthand during their careers as TMT members. Several participants experienced multiple encounters, and, in total, the participants experienced 23 encounters. The number of encounters by each participant is included in Table 1 in the Methods section. One of the executives from our study, Chuck, reported that his experience was limited to knowledge of incivility through industry reputation rather than experiencing it firsthand. Verbal incivility was the most common form of incivility that the participants experienced during their TMT careers. The verbal incivility they brought up included condescending, disparaging, and belittling remarks, emotional outbursts, rudeness, talking over people, yelling, and cussing.

The participants reported that they experienced uncivil leadership behavior in several ways. Specifically, their experiences included incidents where they were targeted as an individual, as part of their TMT, as part of another group within the organization, or as a witness to uncivil behavior directed at others. The one TMT member who did not experience verbal incivility firsthand knew of a verbally uncivil executive by reputation and used that knowledge to his advantage by "stealing" employees from that executive's organization into his own organization. Chuck described the uncivil leader's reputation as "a screamer who never discussed the positive, only yelled about anything going wrong and was unappreciative of some really good people." He added, "I recruited some of my best folks from right under him." Chuck said that it was quite easy to recruit from this organization. The employees Chuck contacted were very willing to listen to the possibility of changing employers because he appeared more attractive to them than the uncivil executive. Thus, one executive's incivility provided a fertile recruiting ground for the benefit of another executive, who used the incivility to his advantage.

Belittlement, condescension

Several of the participants described being the target of or a witness to belittling and condescending remarks. The behavior described was frequently directed by uncivil leaders to employees in the organization across different hierarchical levels. TMT members experienced the behavior at TMT-level meetings with only TMT members present and also at more broadly attended meetings. The examples the participants provided occurred mostly in meetings where there were others in attendance who were witnesses to the uncivil behavior. Belittling included disparaging the ideas of others, criticizing the work of others in a nonproductive manner, and marginalizing the contribution of others. Condescending remarks included remarks made with an air of superiority in which the leader conveyed the message that the ideas of others were inferior to the leader's and not well thought out, that the abilities of another were inferior to the leader's, and that the leader was much smarter and cleverer than others in the meeting. Ken described the uncivil leader as someone who "would belittle people in meetings just to show them that he was the boss." Doug recalled instances where the leader would "call [] names, telling him that his work's not good enough, right in front of everybody else." Jack, who experienced similar behavior, said the effects were quite widespread because "There wasn't anyone who was untouched by his [belittling and condescending] behaviors."

In the examples from our study just described, the leaders were at the very top of their organizations, reporting to the board of directors. It appears that there was no response to the uncivil leader during any of the meetings where the behavior took place nor any attempt to speak with the leader privately. The leaders' uncivil behaviors were widespread in their organizations and were exhibited not only at meetings with TMT members but also when non-TMT members were in attendance. In all of the examples, the leaders exhibited a belief that they possessed an intellect superior to those present.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of response to the uncivil leadership behavior was that the targets believed that responding to the behavior would do no good and would not change anything but could cause

more harmful behavior from the leader, especially from one who outranked all others who were present when the uncivil behavior occurred. Ken remarked, "People like that don't know how to change," indicating that attempts to change the uncivil leader's behavior would be futile. Further, witnesses to uncivil leadership behavior felt that calling him or her out could result in retaliatory behavior from the leader. Thus, lack of responsive action toward the leader could be interpreted as fear of retaliatory behavior from the leader. The uncivil leaders described by our participants were at the top of the organizational chain in terms of rank, compensation, and so on. Such a position carries with it expectations of exemplary behavior. The proverbial "he has enough rope to hang himself" may have come into play, particularly with experienced executives who may hold long-term views and may have witnessed such behavior and the unfavorable outcomes for the uncivil leaders during the executives' careers. At the TMT level, inaction against the uncivil leader could be because the target simply wants to wait it out until the leader does himself in. How the participants helped subordinates who witnessed such behavior is discussed in the Effects of Incivility on Management Style section that follows.

Raised voices

Several participants described behavior that was characterized by a raised voice—yelling, screaming, and cussing. Several of the participants mentioned that a leader would yell at people when things didn't go as the leader planned. They described the leader exercising no control over his reactions to unwanted news or results. Screaming was also recounted. In this type of outburst, the leader would literally scream at whoever the leader thought had something to do with whatever the leader did not like.

The leader often cussed while also screaming and yelling. The leaders who cussed, and cussed liberally, did so while yelling, which had negative effects. For example, Doug expressed the behavior he experienced as "constant yelling and screaming, it doesn't work in the board room or in the business." Another participant, Abe remarked on the behavior of his leader, saying she "had a style that is unbelievable. The darling of Wall Street cussing like a sailor in the board room and throughout the organization." Yet another participant, Ben, described several uncivil behaviors a leader simultaneously demonstrated, which led to negative reactions from the subordinates. Ben mentioned that a leader "display[ed] temper tantrums to all levels of the

organization whenever things didn't go his way, yelling while criticizing and making condescending remarks."

These quotes reveal the participants' opinions that such behavior is unacceptable and unwanted anywhere in the organization. It was apparent that the participants believed yelling and temper tantrums to be conduct unbecoming of someone in a leadership role, particularly at the higher echelons of an organization. They expected leaders to exercise self-control and communicate in a civilized manner. The participants singled out cussing as particularly offensive in addition to being unacceptable. The participants differentiated the board room (or TMT level) from the rest of the organization. This differentiation has several implications. First, it implies that such behavior at the board level is unbelievable if not self-destructive. Acting in such a manner at a board meeting is disrespectful and would most likely have a negative impact on the uncivil leader's future in the organization. Second, it also implies that TMT members could manage incivility within the TMT, but the general workforce should not be expected to manage incivility. Third, it additionally implies that a TMT member acting in an uncivil manner toward a non-TMT member is unfair and that lower level employees are more affected by such behavior than those at the TMT level, given the difference in rank. Fourth, it further implies that any TMT member acting in an uncivil manner could tarnish the image of the entire TMT in the eyes of non-TMT employees. It is noticeable that the participants thought the leaders should have exercised greater self-control in general but particularly at the TMT level. They expressed greater concern over the effects on the lower levels than the effects on the board level since the board members had the power to respond in any way they deemed appropriate but the lower level employees did not.

Verbal monopoly-domination

Other uncivil behavior that the participants experienced includes behavior that can be characterized as verbal monopoly-domination. We describe this behavior as monopolizing the conversation, talking over others, cutting people off, and criticizing any views that differ from those of the leader. This type of behavior is perpetuated by uncivil leaders in an attempt to accomplish whatever the leader wants despite the opinions of others or what the leader thinks their opinions might be. The leader monopolizes meetings, talking just about the entire time, and mandates what the strategy or course of action will be. Abe described this behavior, saying, "His management style was to push everyone and talk over them and get everybody fighting with

everybody. Of course, he got canned because he couldn't get anything done." Mark remarked about a similar issue involving a leader monopolizing and dominating conversations in his organization, "He just verbally beat everybody up all the time to get whatever he wanted." In another example, Ian commented on the negative effects of verbal monopoly-domination, which had far-reaching consequences in his organization: "She was yelling, calling all the shots, to get her way of doing things. The whole department fell apart. It cost many millions to rebuild."

The experiences that the participants recounted focused on three aspects of the verbal monopoly: why the leader engaged in the behavior, the targets' reactions and resulting behaviors, and the more general effects on the organization. It seems that the leader was pushing to get his or her way of getting something done. However, the target's views were not aligned with the leader's views, or the leader thought they were not aligned, or the leader thought the target's input was insignificant. Thus, verbal monopoly as opposed to professional discourse was the management style that the leader employed to push the leader's goals onto those whose job was to achieve the goals. The leader would not listen to anyone's point of view and immediately criticized any comments that even remotely differed from the leader's view. Obviously, the leader thought he or she knew more than anyone in their departments and decided to make all of the decisions. This reliance on their own decision making proved not only to be unproductive but had other negative consequences, as indicated in the examples. The resulting behavior of the targets included in-fighting due to conflicting messages from the leader and the ensuing confusion. In these examples, not only were the individual subordinates negatively affected by the uncivil leader's behavior, but the organizations also suffered consequences, ranging from a failure to meet goals to a multimillion-dollar project to fix the disarray in the organization. In both situations, the leaders were forced to leave the organizations.

TMT reactions to incivility

The participants reacted to incivility by analyzing the reasons for the uncivil leader's behavior and waiting to see the long-term consequences of the behavior. Specifically, TMT members' experiences led them to believe the uncivil leader would not have a very long tenure with the organization. The participants expressed that uncivil behavior was not acceptable at the TMT level and not tenable at that level for long periods of time, implying that it was a waiting game. Ed

noted, "He knows that he doesn't belong where he is and he doesn't wanna lose his position so he'll behave like that. He got promoted beyond his level of capability and therefore lasts for a few years … I've experienced it at the board level, I've experienced it at the subordinate level." Ed expressed that the uncivil behavior stemmed from a leader being promoted above his competency level and attempting to compensate for it by behavior. However, the behavior could not compensate for the incompetency, so the leader's tenure was short-lived. Abe expressed similar sentiments: "[Incivility] masks incompetence. They hit that ceiling. They usually are only there a year or two, and then they're gone." Another participant, Jack, said, "It was all about him, how he thought he looked. It caught up with him. He's no longer there." Jack indicated that the leader was more concerned with what he appeared to accomplish than with what he actually accomplished. Lack of actual accomplishment ended his employment with the organization. Another participant, Oliver, remarked, "He enjoyed seeing the power he had on others. He was screwed-up and didn't last long." In this situation, the uncivil leader was more concerned with his power than with his achievements and, like the leader that Jack mentioned, was forced to leave the organization due to lack of achievement.

The preceding quotes point to the TMT members' opinions that the uncivil leaders were incompetent at the TMT level and engaged in unacceptable behavior to mask their incompetency. The tone of all of the TMT participants in describing this behavior was very analytical. They did not attribute the behavior to anything that had to do with themselves; it had to do with the shortcomings of the uncivil leader and the behavior would be to the uncivil leader's career detriment. Ben remarked, "I didn't have personal feelings. I really saw it as a kind of irrational behavior—something unpleasant to deal with." Ben's responses to the interview questions were typical of the view expressed by the other TMT participants that, although unpleasant, managing the incivility is part of the executive management's responsibilities.

In an example where the participant was the target, the participant decided that the uncivil leader not only had competency issues but would only respond to a showing of greater strength than his. This participant stated that he employed strength to make the uncivil leader see the error of his ways and said, "I told him that nobody would speak like that … that I could take him [on]. Once he understood this, his behavior changed." This aggressive response successfully dealt with the uncivil behavior. However, this was the only aggressive response, which,

interestingly, was made by the youngest participant in the sample.

Other than the one example described, the other TMT members considered managing unpleasant matters such as incivility to be part of their executive job. It was integrated into their work ethic to manage whatever needed to be managed to get their jobs done. The need to perform meaningful work was strong among the TMT members, who took it as a given that they would continue to perform at a high level despite the uncivil leadership behavior directed at them. "I live and work around things and go on and do my job and get results" was how Abe described his focus on the tasks at hand rather than getting distracted by uncivil treatment. Another TMT member, Fedor, said, "I have very high expectations for my own performance. I try to do the best I can do all the time." Ed remarked that he had a similar focus on working hard and not letting anything else influence him. He said, "I got to this level by achieving and working hard. It is my nature."

These quotes express the ability to self-manage that helped the participants look past the uncivil leader's behavior and keep their focus on their personal standards of performance. The quotes also shed light on how the participants cope with incivility. Their responses demonstrate that they rely on a personal behavior code, loyalty, and self-management. The participants Ed, Abe, Jack, and Oliver also expressed their observations that the leaders who exhibit uncivil behavior do not last long at the TMT level. They agreed that uncivil leaders will do themselves in in a relatively short number of years. Such an outlook most likely assists TMT members in managing short-term issues having to do with incivility in favor of their longer term goals.

Effects of incivility on management style

TMT members not only discussed their loyalty to the organization as a whole but also expressed a sense of responsibility to support their subordinates in dealing with the effects of incivility. The TMT members felt they needed to focus on the greater good and their sense of responsibility to their subordinates. They therefore shifted their efforts from being passive recipients of or witnesses to incivility to actively finding ways to help their subordinates cope with the effects of incivility.

The TMT participants in our study engaged in social interactions with their subordinates regarding uncivil leadership behavior in a variety of ways, including coaching, initiating discussions about incivility, and providing helpful explanations about handling incivility issues. The TMT participants felt it was their duty to the subordinates and to the organization to attempt to mitigate the effects of the uncivil behavior. As mentioned in the preceding, TMT members felt it was unfair for employees at lower levels of the organization to be subjected to incivility from higher leadership, and they did not expect lower level employees to manage incivility as well as TMT members did. They commented that they felt that the effects of the uncivil leadership were greater at the lower levels than at the TMT level. In describing the effects of incivility at the lower levels of the organization, Doug stated, "Employees at a lower level, many of them got very unmotivated because of [uncivil leadership behaviors] … It can change their whole way of working for periods of time. I tried to explain to them as best as I could." Abe commented on the emotional impact of uncivil leadership behavior, noting that "some were visibly affected, from an emotional standpoint. I tried to alleviate the offensive without undermining somebody's authority." Ben remarked on how he would help alleviate the effects of incivility: "I try and put a positive spin on things and try and get people productive again." Similarly, Ian commented on his attempts to prevent uncivil leadership exhibited by top leadership from spreading and from influencing lower echelons of employees. He said, "I tried to contain as best as I could. It was filtering down."

The participants attempted to shield their subordinates and others in the organization from the trickle-down effects of the uncivil leadership behaviors, to diminish any feelings of animosity, and, in some cases, tried to reduce the uncivil leader's influence within the organization. They spoke with subordinates in small group meetings and privately coached them, pointing out the positives in the organization. Ben remarked, "After he was done, I would speak about something productive with them." This was his way of distracting the attention of his subordinates from the uncivil behavior. The TMT participants also attempted to keep subordinates focused on the goals at hand and to keep their attention on positive actions and achievements. Additionally, they tried to reduce their subordinates' interactions with the uncivil leader by limiting meeting attendance and other face-to-face interactions.

Further, the TMT members highlighted the importance of always being on guard against incivility, and of maintaining the good qualities of management. The responses to our research questions suggest that TMT members are influenced by incivility to be better leaders; have "thicker skins" than others in the organization, possibly due to their longer term outlook; have more analytical skills to cope with incivility at the top of an organization than what research attributes to the

general workforce; and that they try to mitigate the effects of incivility on subordinates. Rather than being negatively affected, TMT members learned from the uncivil leadership behavior of those around them and figured out how not to treat people. For example, Fedor remarked, "I learned what not to do" from observing the effects of incivility. Ed noted that experiencing and witnessing incivility served as "a reminder of what not to do." These examples are representative of the responses we also received from other participants. All 14 TMT members who experienced uncivil behavior identified an opportunity to learn from experiencing incivility what type of leader not to be and considered such self-improvement and greater self-awareness as a positive outcome of the experience. They saw a silver lining and did not view themselves as victims. They also mentioned that although they believed that most of the uncivil leaders they encountered are intentionally uncivil, they were cautious and guarded against unilaterally assuming that all uncivil behavior is intentional.

Discussion

The literature suggests that uncivil leadership invokes feelings that have a range of far-reaching negative consequences that impact attitudes, morale, motivation, job satisfaction, performance, turnover, trust, loyalty, and citizenship behaviors (Miner et al., 2012; Penney & Spector, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007). However, the participants in our study did not describe these negative reactions. The reactions to incivility of our study's TMT member participants were different than those of the non-TMT members who participated in surveys from earlier studies (Miner et al., 2012; Penney & Spector, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007). For example, our participants did not describe counterproductive workplace behaviors (Penney & Spector, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007) or depression as found in studies of property management employees and undergraduate students (Miner et al., 2012) as a result of experiencing or witnessing incivility.

TMT members from our study reacted to incivility by analyzing the uncivil behavior they encountered. They followed the approach discussed by Porath and Pearson (2012)—to ponder and reflect in a rational manner about the best manner of coping with the uncivil behavior. They described the incivility as being the uncivil leader's problem and a factor that might limit the leader's tenure as an executive. Only one TMT participant demonstrated some belligerence in his response by addressing the uncivil leader in an aggressive manner. This response is consistent with the finding of Porath, Overbeck, and Pearson (2008) that higher status males respond to incivility more aggressively than others.

In contrast to what was reported in some studies (Miner et al., 2012; Penney & Spector, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007), the TMT members in our study did not report a decrease in their motivation as a result of experiencing incivility. The TMT members' strong self-identity as executive leaders may have served to keep their emotions and level of motivation intact.

The TMT members from our study also expressed a strong sense of job embeddedness, identity with their work, and conscientiousness, consistent with the findings of Taylor et al. (2012) and Chen et al. (2013). Our participants realized that employees at lower levels of the organization exposed to uncivil behavior from top leadership became unmotivated, resulting in decreased performance, which was also found in earlier studies (Barker Caza & Cortina, 2007; Penney & Spector, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007). However, our study's participants made it a priority to shield their subordinates from the effects of incivility, unlike the case in earlier studies that found there to be a lack of leadership intervention against mistreatment (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Doshy & Wang, 2014; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

Our article extends extant research by exploring uncivil behaviors at the TMT level of organizations. It contributes to the literature by further expanding the understanding of the effects of uncivil leadership behavior. Our article examines the effects of uncivil leadership behavior when it occurs at the top echelons of an organization and evaluates the reactions, strategies, and coping mechanisms of TMT members who experience incivility. Our article also evaluates how TMT members mitigate the effects of incivility on lower echelon employees.

Additionally, it examines leader–member interactions with TMT subordinates and the resulting effects on TMT leadership style. Furthermore, it examines factors related to the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of the limited number of employees who achieve TMT status and how these qualities help them to handle incivility issues.

The spiraling effects of incivility discussed by Andersson and Pearson (1999) were not apparent in our study. Rather than allowing for the effects of incivility to spread throughout the organization, the TMT member participants in our study took steps to mitigate any spiraling effects. This is perhaps due to TMT members feeling a sense of ownership of their organization, in contrast to lower level employees who tend to reciprocate incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Our research has practical implications for a variety of organizations. Lessons learned from those who have achieved TMT status may provide guidance for other leaders at various levels in an organization, particularly those with aspirations to advance to the top. Those who are in leadership positions may find it useful to learn what TMT members have experienced and how they addressed uncivil leaders. It may also assist those experiencing uncivil leadership behavior in the workplace to help subordinates manage the behavior. It may further serve as a reminder that TMT members must guard against uncivil leadership behavior.

Limitations and future research

This study is limited by the number of executives agreeing to be interviewed. However, as is frequently the case, it is extremely difficult to obtain access to TMT members, particularly when discussing sensitive topics. The study is also limited by all of the participants being from for-profit organizations in North America. Therefore, future studies may want to examine the role of cross-cultural global context on the ways that TMTs address uncivil leadership, as well as how they address it in not-for-profit organizations, where motives for work may be more altruistic and less competitive. Since cultural norms in other nations may be different from those in the United States, the threshold for tolerance of uncivil leadership behavior may vary and may have a different set of implications than it has in the United States. These issues should be examined in future studies.

A further limitation is the all-male gender of our study's participants and the resultant lack of diversity in perspectives. While a limitation, this sample is in some ways reflective of a corporate culture where there are still Fortune 500 companies with an all-male TMT. For example, a recent Fortune report highlighted that among Fortune 500 companies in 2018, only three executive boards reached parity in terms of having the same number of women as men, and 12 companies had no women on their boards despite their boards ranging in size from five to 17 members (Zillman, 2018). While we attempted to recruit female executives, our access was limited. Given differences in organizational behavior based on gender, discussed in other studies, including perspectives of female TMT members should be considered in future studies. When looking at incivility, social domination theory and gender theory have been found to be important (Cortina et al., 2001). Specifically, social domination theory as discussed by Cortina et al. (2001) suggests that the hierarchy of power influences behavior such that the higher status

of males verses females was found to be related to the prevalence of incivility directed toward females. In a study of federal court employees, women reported more uncivil experiences than men (Cortina et al., 2001). Trudel and Reio (2011) found that women in the health care and manufacturing industries reported more uncivil experiences than men. Thus, future studies should contrast male and female experiences with uncivil leadership behavior, particularly among TMT members.

Experiences across generations may also be quite different. While our study was limited by our participants representing just two generations (11 were Baby Boomers and four were Gen Xs), contrasting uncivil leadership experiences across multiple different generations of employees should provide interesting insight. Generational theory as discussed by Leiter et al. (2010) posits that people born in specific bands of years share common experiences and have similar values and attitudes. Such values and attitudes can influence job satisfaction, perceptions about incivility, and tolerance of incivility, particularly by those in authority positions. Gen X employees reported more experiences with incivility in the workplace than employees in the Baby Boomer generation (Leiter et al., 2010). This difference was not apparent in our study, perhaps due to the small sample and our focus on TMT leaders. However, some of the leaders from older generations may approach leadership with the "my way or the highway" idiom as their motto, not realizing the incivility of their behavior perceived by the representatives of younger generations.

The motives for leaders engaging in uncivil leadership behavior, particularly when targeting TMT members, was outside of the scope of our study but would be an important and interesting area for future research. The possibility that strong TMT leaders could mitigate the trickle-down effects of uncivil leadership behavior discussed by Dong, Hui, and Loi (2012) is also an area that should be considered for further investigation.

Our findings support some of the established types of uncivil leadership but also uncover additional areas for future research. Our findings suggest that TMT leaders have a sense of loyalty to the organization as well as to their subordinates, which helps them overcome some of the negative effects of being the targets of incivility and compels them to stand up against incivility targeted at others. This is different from earlier incivility research, which has suggested that sometimes leaders will not intervene against workplace mistreatment (Davenport et al., 2002; Doshy & Wang, 2014; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

The TMT participants described characteristics of high job embeddedness and conscientiousness, similar

to the findings associated with mitigating victimization (Taylor et al., 2012). Therefore, contrasting characteristics and personality traits of TMT members and employees in lower echelons of a company and the differences in how they cope with uncivil leadership behavior would pose an interesting area for future research. Other potential areas for future research include researching interpersonal conflict between TMT leaders and TMT subordinates for each of Rahim and Magner's (1995) five methods of coping with incivility.

Conclusion

While it is unlikely that uncivil leadership behavior will ever be a thing of the past, we can learn from TMT members, as they have demonstrated career success and have significant power to influence others in their organizations. By examining how TMT members are able to overcome challenges associated with experiencing uncivil leadership behavior at the top of an organization and how they do not allow it to deter them from further advancing in their careers, this study may help others in the organization be better equipped to persevere and advance in their careers despite facing incivility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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