

Uncivil behaviour in the workplace causes mental fatigue and is contagious

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It is a common maxim that you should treat others the way you personally would want to be treated. This sentiment spills into the work environment when interacting with colleagues, in that we often are encouraged to treat others at work with respect and dignity. Sometimes, this notion is conveyed directly to employees during training programs, on company retreats, or in the actual mantras that are espoused as part of an organisation's mission statement or core values. Or, it could be the case that these ideas are just part of typical social norms in society that do not need to be explicitly stated. After all, it makes sense that treating others well would be not only beneficial to employees, but also beneficial to the company, as a means to improve the quality of work life and levels of morale.

At the same time, however, there has been an increasing realisation that, on a day-to-day basis, rude and uncivil behaviours towards others in organisations are on the rise. Unlike outright abuse or harassment, these behaviours are not extreme or overt. Instead, it's the insulting coworker ignoring your question during the Monday morning meeting when everyone is gathered. Or, it's your colleague using a condescending tone as you are discussing the project you are collaborating on together. These less extreme behaviours, albeit minor when considered individually, can add up for employees — estimates suggest that incivility costs organisations thousands of dollars each year as this experience contributes to employee ill-being, absenteeism, and even turnover over time. However, if employees know that being uncivil is problematic, and they dislike being treated in this manner, the question arises as to why these types of behaviours continue to persist.

The goal of our research was to understand not only why incivility continues to be prevalent, but also how it might spiral through organisations. More explicitly, we considered whether it is possible for an employee who was once the victim of incivility in the workplace to become an *instigator* of incivility towards his or her own coworkers. We also investigated factors that might explain why these cycles of incivility perpetuate, and what organisations can do, if anything, to stop its spread.

In our study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, we found evidence that incivility in the workplace is contagious because employees may “strike back” towards their coworkers after being treated poorly themselves because of the mental fatigue they personally feel after negative social interactions. We tracked 70 full-time employees for 10 consecutive workdays and asked them about their own personal *experience* of incivility at work, as well as their own *instigation* of incivility towards others. To quantify employee deficits in self-control associated with mental fatigue, we also asked them to complete a Stroop task at each survey administration. This is a common task used by psychologists that captures a person’s reaction time to a prompt. Longer reactions times are indicative of increased mental fatigue.

Our results showed that incivility is, in fact, contagious — employees who reported being treated poorly earlier in the day were more likely to subsequently engage in uncivil acts directed towards other employees. In part, this was due to employees feeling mentally fatigued after having expended personal resources dealing with the same type of negative treatment themselves. When employees are exposed to incivility, they often spend time and energy trying to figure out *why* this mistreatment happened. Did they do something to cause their coworker to lash out at them? Or, was the coworker just acting out? As employees try to process this information, this increases what is already a mentally fatiguing experience. Regrettably, when employees are mentally fatigued, they lack sufficient self-control to restrain their own uncivil and impatient behaviours, causing them to ‘pay forward’ this rude behaviour to others.

Given the ambiguity surrounding incivility, there are certain contexts that make incivility contagion more likely. In our work, employees who also reported working in highly political environments — environments characterised by co-workers who frequently engage in self-serving acts that are not sanctioned by their employer (e.g., taking credit for the work of others, blaming co-workers for mistakes) — experienced even greater deficits in self-control in response to uncivil treatment.

When employees are in a political environment, the ambiguity surrounding incivility places even greater demands on already limited self-control resources because being treated poorly may now be due to an employee trying to sabotage another employee in order to get ahead, or to gain more resources in the organisation. Given the potential threats to the self, and one’s livelihood, this means that employees working in highly political contexts will expend even *more* resources attempting to figure out not only why they were treated uncivilly, but how their experience of being targeted by incivility fits within the broader political environment that they are working in.

Although our work highlighted that employees will strike back against others, we were able to shed light on certain employees who are able to “resist” lashing out. This particular group of employees in our study had higher levels of construal, which reflects the extent to which employees think broadly about the implications and meaning of their behaviour in context in terms of its impact on how they will be seen by others. Employees with higher levels of construal likely realise that treating others poorly at work will hurt their image in the organisation and, more importantly, hurt their own personal ego. This presents an optimistic take for managers: by encouraging employees to think about how their actions affect themselves and others, incivility may be curtailed, even when employees feel exhausted.

So, what can individuals do to stop incivility from spiralling out of control in the workplace? Given the central role that mental fatigue and a lack of self-control play in the process through which incivility is transferred from one employee to another, our research suggests that it would behoove employees to take short breaks, perhaps for a walk outdoors or an off-site lunch, after experiencing incivility from a coworker. This would allow for the replenishment of depleted mental resources, which should enhance the ability of those who are targets of incivility to regulate subsequent behaviour and, essentially, nip incivility spirals in the bud.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors’ paper [Who strikes back? A daily investigation of when and why](#)

incivility begets incivility, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101, 1620-1634. doi: 10.1037/apl0000140

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