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Can We All Get Along? The Interpersonal Challenge at Work

Clive Muir

Stephen F Austin State University, muirc@sfasu.edu

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Vietnam. The reeducation of those in the south may have led to a greater sense of commitment and satisfaction arising out of gratitude for job stability. In contrast, employees in the north may hold more negative attitudes because of the economic restructuring, since most of their jobs have been in state-owned firms. With the process of equitization and reorganization, the amount of downsizing and job changing may be more extensive in the north, causing more uncertainty and less commitment.

The researchers also compared their findings from the Vietnamese employees with similar samples of employees in Japan and the U.S. In general, the Vietnamese employees expressed levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction that were quite similar to the Japanese and American samples. These findings are particularly interesting, since the Vietnamese employees received significantly lower income from their work. The researchers suggest the high level of commitment, despite low wages, held by Vietnamese employees may result from the comparison of their work situation with their own previous experiences and those of their family members and friends. Most surveyed employees felt they were better off than they had been in the past and held jobs that were better than those of their neighbors and family members. Also, Vietnamese employees appear to be willing to work harder to support their firms in a newly developing economy than equivalent Japanese or American workers.

It is important to note that the data were gathered in 1995, a period when Vietnam had double-digit economic growth and was a popular destination for foreign investment. The end of the 1990s, however, brought the Asian financial crisis to Vietnam, with rapid withdrawal of investment and declining growth. Thus, as the authors concede, it is difficult to know what employee attitudes would be today, in a time of generally less positive economic outlook. On the other hand, the signing of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Agreement in July 2000 may signal a revitalization of the economy and more opportunities for employees and employers.

Hung, Appold, and Kalleberg's overall findings and testing of assumptions developed in industrialized countries should give support to managers—both local and foreign—seeking to use that talented work force.

Source: Hung, L. N., Appold, S. J., & Kalleberg, A. L., 1999. Work attitudes in Vietnam: Organizational commitment and job satisfaction in a restructuring economy. *Journal of Asian Business*, 15(3): 41-68.

Can we all get along? The interpersonal challenge at work

Clive Muir, Morgan State University

How many of us sometimes forget to say please or thank you to our coworkers? Do we screen our calls using voice mail? Are we guilty of hovering impatiently over the desk of a coworker who is on the phone? Do we loudly discuss personal issues on the phone when others are nearby?

Researchers Lynne Andersson, of Temple University, and Christine Pearson, of the University of North Carolina, suggest that acting rudely or showing disregard for others contributes to an increasing incivility in the workplace. Andersson and Pearson's analysis of workplace incivility indicates there is more to interpersonal interaction in the American workplace than the positive image of water-cooler conversations, lunchroom camaraderie, or after-work happy hours. Rather, we are also likely to find a range of discordant behaviors exhibited by employees toward their coworkers and by managers toward their subordinates. These behaviors may be overtly aggressive and violent, or subtle and unthreatening.

There are several reasons for this trend toward incivility. For one, there is greater diversity among employees; more than ever before, men and women and people of different cultural backgrounds are sharing space and interacting throughout the workday. It is likely that misunderstandings will surface and feelings will be hurt. Add to the mix the greater reliance on temporary workers, who may not share the ethos of a particular company and don't care to impress their coworkers.

Moreover, companies have continued to cut operating budgets and have reengineered their production and service processes. The resulting layoffs have rubbed many workers the wrong way, and even those who stay may not feel committed to their jobs or do not wish to bond with their coworkers. In addition, the layers of supervision have flattened; workers and their managers may be on such familiar terms that hierarchical relationships have lost much of the respect they have traditionally demanded. Finally, the globalization of business makes the average worker seem less important in the larger scheme of things. Communication has become more impersonal and asynchronous, and small courtesies are often overlooked in business correspondence.

Given the greater attention paid to more violent acts at work, we may not have noticed or cared/

about the slip in civility. When we consider workplace aggression, we may think of disgruntled postal employees shooting their coworkers or clients who attack their investment advisors over market losses. In recent years, we have also seen students shooting their classmates and teachers in retaliation for bullying and other acts of humiliation.

However, in light of such aggression, Andersson and Pearson argue that we need to pay more attention to incivility. They warn that workplace incivility often starts out as harmless behavior, but that inconsiderate acts can spiral into more overt and sometimes physical aggression. To better understand the spiraling effect of workplace incivility, they offer a framework that reflects a complex set of behaviors on the part of instigators and their targets.

The spiral begins when an instigator commits a thoughtless act, which he or she may consider harmless, to one or more target individuals. If a target perceives that act to be uncivil or unfair, he or she is likely to reciprocate with similar incivility. In turn, the instigator responds to the reciprocated behavior, resulting in a tit-for-tat exchange of uncivil interactions. Andersson and Pearson suggest that an accumulation of incivilities, or perhaps just one particularly loathsome incivility, can cause the spiral to escalate to more serious insults or perhaps even physical responses.

The characteristics of the individuals involved and the context of the workplace are important influences over the spiral. Although many individual characteristics are likely to play a role in how uncivil behaviors are perceived or reciprocated, Andersson and Pearson are particularly concerned with hot-tempered individuals—those who are impulsive and emotionally reactive. They suggest that hot-tempered individuals are more likely than others to take offense at ambiguously rude behaviors, seek to correct perceived injustices, or act aggressively. They also note that such individuals are more prone to drug and alcohol abuse, which may exacerbate their temperamental disposition toward aggression. When hot-tempered individuals are involved in a spiral of incivility, the likelihood that the spiral will escalate to aggressive behavior is increased.

A greater degree of informality at work, common to many organizations, may encourage the escalation of incivility. Though the trend is toward open communication and dispensing with formality in communication among workers, some employees see this as a signal that anything goes, and indulge in behaviors only accepted among close acquaintances. In contrast, formal climates prescribe

standards for acceptable behavior, and there is little ambiguity regarding norms for personal expressions and interpersonal activities.

A greater degree of informality at work, common to many organizations, may encourage the escalation of incivility.

Andersson and Pearson's analysis of workplace incivility is useful because it departs from the notion that workplace aggression consists of single acts, and shows how thoughtless utterances may indeed be the beginning of a violent confrontation. While they acknowledge the difficulty with researching and developing measures of incivility, they propose that a work environment characterized by uncivil behaviors can make workers miserable and lead to high turnover and lower productivity. They caution supervisors to scrutinize their own verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the presence of employees and urge human resource professionals to work with line managers to address issues in the workplace that might trigger rude behaviors and create an environment of hostility and interpersonal conflicts.

Source: Andersson, L., & Pearson, C. 1999. Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 452-471.

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Group exit: How breakaway organizations happen

Reg Litz, University of Manitoba

Not too many years ago, the group of people responsible for inventing the innovative hand-held computer, Palm Pilot, left their employer, 3Com, to form a new company, Handspring, Inc. Their departure followed an unsuccessful attempt to convince 3Com to establish a separate Palm Pilot division. Interestingly, such group-exit behavior is not an isolated occurrence, but may account for the founding of a significant proportion of organizations.

In an intriguing study of breakaway church groups, researchers Bruno Dyck and Fred Starke, of the University of Manitoba, have examined how these breakaway organizations develop. Their research suggests that developing breakaway organizations follow a fairly consistent pattern of events that culminates in the formation of the new startup organization.

Dyck and Starke studied 11 separate self-govern-

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