Consequences of Workplace Incivility

There is an extensive body of research that shows that workplace incivility has significant adverse consequences for targets, bystanders, and workplace cultural norms. Workplace incivility is defined as, "low-intensity 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 and Pearson, 1999, p. 457).

Low-level behaviors such as rudeness tend to be tolerated in the workplace, yet the evidence overwhelmingly shows that incivility has significant and far-reaching negative consequences comparable to the effects of abusive supervision and bullying (Hershcovis, 2011). In addition to experiencing physical and mental health problems (Nielsen et al. 2014; Porath and Pearson, 2012), research shows that for targets, workplace incivility leads to decreased sense of belonging (Hershcovis, et al., 2017), decreased engagement in the organization (Penney and Spector, 2005), lower productivity and job performance (Bibi, et al., 2013; Cortina et al., 2001; Lewis and Melecha, 2012; Rahim and Cosby, 2016; Sliter, et al., 2012), reduced creativity (Chang, 2011; Porath and Erez, 2009), lower speed and accuracy on work tasks (Bachrach et al., 2006), lower work engagement (Beattie and Griffin, 2014; Chen et al., 2013), absenteeism (Hoel and Cooper, 2000; Porath and Pearson, 2012), job withdrawal and decreased job satisfaction (Bibi et al., 2013; Carr et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2013; Laschinger and Fida, 2014; Lutgen-Sandvick et al., 2007; Welbourne et al., 2015), turnover intentions (George and Bettenhausen, 1990; Ghosh, et al., 2013; Hooft et al., 2004; Kim and Stoner, 2008; Koys, 2001; Spence Laschinger et al., 2009), and lower employee retention (Lim et al., 2008; Pearson and Porath, 2005; Rau-Foster, 2004). Incivility perpetrated by a single bad actor is often sufficient to trigger these negative consequences (Hershcovis, et al., 2017). In addition, being a target of incivility is a strong predictor of subsequently perpetrating incivility against work colleagues (Hauge, et al., 2009; Torkelson et al., 2016).

There is extensive evidence that bystanders who witness incivility happening to others, but are not targets themselves, experience reduced creativity and job performance and are less helpful to colleagues and to their workgroups (Ferguson and Barry, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Witnesses of rude workplace behavior generally become less prosocial and are less likely to share their resources with colleagues (De Cremer and Van Hiel, 2006; Porath and Erez, 2009).

When individuals engage in helping behavior in a team context, it increases the level of prosocial behavior displayed by other team members (George and Bettenhausen, 1990), which in turn leads to better team performance (Koys, 2001: Podsakoff et al., 1997), for instance, speed and accuracy in completing a team task (Bachrach et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, work conflict has been shown to decrease helping behavior, which ultimately damages team dynamics and decreases performance (Ng and Van Dyne, 2005).

Leiter (2013) proposes that workplace incivility should be seen as a workplace culture problem rather than as a problem of individual actors because workplace incivility shapes overarching cultural norms. People who see a work colleague as civil are more likely to seek that person's advice and see that person as a leader (Porath et al., 2015). Further, the more the colleague is seen as civil by close colleagues, the better that person's job performance ratings. In contrast, employees who observe hostile workplace behaviors often mimic those behaviors against the target, as well as against other group members (Salin, 2003). Employees become more aggressive after witnessing aggressive colleagues (Aquino and Douglas, 2003; Glomb and Liao, 2003), and witnesses tend to take sides and are more likely to align with the perpetrator for fear of becoming the next target (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2011). This may encourage ongoing and escalating incivility on the part of the perpetrator (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

Workplace Incivility, Social Norms, and Protected-Class Harassment

Workplace incivility is very destructive for group norms and social cohesion (De Dreu, 2008). When incivility between individuals is tolerated, it serves to establish group norms that may indirectly perpetuate this kind of behavior within the group (Heames and Harvey, 2006; Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Foulk, Woolum, and Erez (2016) found evidence of a contagion effect even for low-level negative behaviors, such that negative interactions between two people tend to spill over into subsequent negative interactions with other colleagues. In addition, ambient rudeness in the workplace has been shown to *co-occur with more severe forms of uncivil behavior such as sexual harassment* (Lim and Cortina, 2005) *and protected-class discrimination* (Cortina, 2008; Cortina, et al., 2013). According to the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine in their report on Sexual Harassment of Women (2018), sexual harassment and other types of identity-based discrimination take place against a backdrop of incivility which provides an environment of generalized disrespect *that makes identity-based harms more normative*.

Incivility within Higher Education

The problem of incivility within higher education has been well-documented, and is considered especially pervasive within academic settings, as compared to other work environments (Cassell, 2011; Keashly and Neuman, 2010; King and Piotrowski, 2015; Twale and De Luca, 2008). Organizational and work features of the higher ed context lend themselves to an increased likelihood for disagreement and hostility (Neuman and Baron, 2003). Williams, et al. (2013) found that incivility instigated by high-performing scholars and researchers is more likely to be ignored. This may be why there is often a perceived tolerance of sexual harassment within academia (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Concepts such as academic freedom with the attendant right to "speak freely" with immunity, and processes such as tenure review and promotion that do not evaluate individuals on "collegiality" provide cover for behaviors that would typically not be tolerated in private industry because they are so damaging to productivity, morale, and employee retention. Nevertheless, academic departments with wide-spread incivility problems are likely, over time, to suffer reputational harm (Pearson and

Porath, 2005). Collegiality is an important factor in retention of faculty (Norman, et al., 2006). Targeted faculty are more likely to leave hostile departments and departments that become well-known for pervasive abusive behavior perpetrated by "difficult" colleagues, towards other faculty and graduate students, are likely to struggle to recruit the most promising graduate students and new faculty members (Keashly and Neuman, 2010).

Addressing Incivility

Foulk, et al. (2016) recommend that organizations pay more attention to incivility and doing whatever is possible to create a workplace culture that addresses even slight negative behaviors. Workplace training that focuses on increasing civility and respect can be effective at improving the work culture by reducing rudeness, thereby shifting group norms (Leiter et al., 2012). One year after an intervention to reduce incivility and improve work attitudes in a hospital setting, some of the gains were still evident, but it was clear that one intervention was not sufficient to maintain immediate post-intervention gains; shifting the workplace culture must be an ongoing effort.

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