Employees Behave Badly Under “Do Nothing” Managers

Your work meetings are full of employees paying more attention to the text messages on their smart phones than to the individual speaking. You offer a suggestion and notice a coworker rolling his eyes in a condescending manner. You smile at a colleague in the hall who seemingly ignores you. Sound familiar? If so, you’re not alone. A recent poll suggests that 98% of North-American employees have experienced incivility in the workplace. Organizational researchers describe that incivility, synonymous with rudeness, can take many shapes or forms in the workplace: ignoring or excluding someone, eye-rolling, gossiping, making demeaning remarks to or about someone, or showing little interest in another’s opinion.

If you think that failing to hold the door open for a colleague or making a joke at another’s expense are relatively harmless, researchers at the Fox School of Business at Temple University would suggest that you should think again. In their paper The Effects of Passive Leadership on Workplace Incivility, Assistant Professor and Cigna Research Fellow Crystal Harold, and Assistant Professor Brian Holtz examine the role that managers play in fostering rude behavior.

“We were interested in studying workplace incivility, and more specifically, factors that might promote the occurrence of incivility because let’s face it, just about everyone has either been treated rudely at work, treated someone else rudely at work, or both . . . There are people out there who likely think that these sorts of behaviors are fairly innocuous. But available data would suggest otherwise.”

In their research, Harold and Holtz draw from prior incivility research indicating that victims of incivility are significantly more likely to decrease the quality of their work, be absent from the office, and ultimately leave the organization. What’s more, addressing the fallout from workplace incivility is estimated to cost companies millions of dollars each year.

“Because incivility has negative psychological and physical effects on victims and is costly for organizations, it is important that we begin to understand why incivility occurs in the first place. What conditions foster an uncivil work environment?” Holtz continued, “It made sense to us that leadership would be an important and significant variable to consider.”
Harold and Holtz conducted two studies in which they surveyed employees, their supervisors, and their colleagues to determine the role of management in workplace incivility. “We were particularly interested in passive leadership. In literature and popular press, you read a lot about either these amazing transformational leaders at one extreme, or these tyrannical nightmare bosses on the other,” Harold noted. “However, there are many managers who fall somewhere in the middle; who aren’t particularly active, who try to ignore problems, who overlook employees’ bad behaviors, or who are just generally reticent to actually manage their employees.”

Holtz added, “If someone is rude to you at work and your manager does nothing in response, you’re likely to conclude that either no one cares, or that these types of behaviors are acceptable. It is the manager’s responsibility to intervene in the face of workplace incivility. When that doesn’t happen, it creates an environment in which future uncivil acts are more likely.”

Results of their research do in fact support that employees who work under passive managers are both more likely to experience rudeness, and more likely to behave rudely themselves.

“We found that the experience of being treated with incivility coupled with working for a passive manager significantly increased the likelihood that an employee would both behave with incivility him/herself, as well as engage in withdrawal behaviors such as showing up to work late, or even calling out when not actually sick” Holtz explained. “The bottom line is that in the process of doing nothing, these types of managers are actually doing a lot of damage.”

In light of these results, Harold and Holtz offer a number of practical suggestions for organizations wanting to deter workplace incivility. “First, you have to educate your employees and management that these seemingly harmless behaviors are anything but. Training employees, and importantly managers, to recognize what incivility is, is an important first step” Harold noted.

Companies also need to set ground rules. “Make clear which behaviors constitute incivility, clarify the consequences for engaging in these behaviors, and adopt a zero-tolerance policy. This is where managerial training comes into play. Managers must learn to intervene when employees are behaving badly towards one another, and quickly take punitive action against offenders,” Holtz said.

Harold concluded “At the end of the day, managers have to be good role models. A company’s efforts to curb rudeness will be for naught, if the manager him/herself is the one instigating the incivility.”

Harold and Holtz’s study is in press at the Journal of Organizational Behavior.
—Alexis Wright-Whitley