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Abstract

This paper examines rude and/or uncivil managerial behavior as perceived by employees. Using a medical analogy, in this paper common symptoms of rude behavior are identified and prevention/treatment programs are prescribed. Illustrations from work settings help demonstrate and identify employee interpretations of managerial behaviors. Warnings are provided that point toward possible outcomes when managerial bad behavior is permitted to permeate the work environment.

Introduction

While the headline grabbing corporate escapades of Enron and Tyco executives divert our attention, a malignant virus of catastrophic proportions is invading our work force. This virus attacks the norms of workplace behavior and weakens corporate productivity and profitability. This virus is very subtle and has been known to spread from person-to-person, usually during routine work activities. The virus, once passed from one person to another, is very often passed back to the original sender with increased intensity. Valuable company employees coming into contact with those affected by this virus often express a desire to avoid the infected employee, reduce their work effort, reduce the amount of time spent at work, often think about leaving the company, and many leave the company. The name of this virus is incivility. Anderson and Pearson (1999) proposed a theoretical framework for understanding and studying incivility in the workplace. They presented a model that showed how modest acts of incivility on the part of one party can generate responding incivility and ultimately spiral into worsening forms of deviant workplace behaviors.

No one in any organization is immune from rude or uncivil behavior. Anyone at any level can engage in or be confronted by acts of incivility; this includes customers and clients who come in contact with uncivil organizational members. As we search for remedies to thwart the spread of this disease we recognize that uncivil behavior can propagate in any relationship at any organizational level. However, this paper operates on the premise that managers are in the best position to initiate or prevent the incivility spiral. We do not infer that managers are the primary carriers of or perpetrators of rude or uncivil acts, simply that in their managerial roles they should have more influence over the larger part of the workforce and through exemplary leadership be more able to contain the damage caused by these unacceptable behaviors.

The impact of managerial rudeness is supported broadly in the works of others. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) summarized the meta-analytic findings from over 100,000 employees surveyed from a broad range of more than 2,500 business units and concluded that if people have a bad manager, they are likely to look for another job. In recent years, several authors have focused on extremely bad managerial behaviors to help explain the relationship between managerial practices and various employee outcomes. For example, Ashford (1997, p. 126) used the term "petty tyrant" to

describe managers who use “their power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and perhaps vindictively.” Similarly, Tepper (2000, p. 178) developed a measure of “abusive supervision” that assessed “the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors.” Crocker (2005) developed a measure of employee perceptions of managerial incivility and found a positive relationship between managerial incivility and employee turnover intentions, as well as an inverse relationship between employee perceptions of managerial incivility and employee performance. Using the items from Crocker’s (2005) measure as a framework, this paper explores uncivil managerial behaviors, employee reactions to those behaviors, and recommendations for prevention and treatment of the rude flu.

Symptoms

An exhaustive list of rudeness symptoms is not feasible, but there are two dimensions in which uncivil behaviors tend to be observed, experienced, or inferred. In the dimension we label “Acts of Commission” the rude flu is dispersed through interpersonal exchanges. “Acts of Commission” spread contagion by direct contact between a carrier and a victim and also by splatter, which occurs when others observe this exchange. In the dimension we call “Acts of Omission,” the rude flu is spread when the a person feels mistreated or slighted as a result of work-related issue that is perceived to be neglected or unfairly exercised by the supervisor.

Acts of Commission

Irrational behavior

Employees who witnessed this behavior implied that there was no plausible reason for the behavior, and even when there may have been a reason, the behavior was considered too extreme for the circumstances. One employee mentioned a boss who “started yelling at me for bringing her a coke in a can, rather than in a bottle.” Another employee spoke of a manager who “took his frustration and problems out on me. I was not responsible for his problems, but he sure made me feel like it.” Yet another employee said her boss “yells at me sometimes for things that he has done.” The essence of irrational behavior resides in the apparent lack of justification for a manager’s actions.

Loss of temper

Losing one’s temper occurs when there is a rational explanation for a manager’s action, but again, the action itself is too extreme for the situation. A perfect example of this comes from the employee who wrote, “Without explaining to me what I did wrong, he just started shouting all kinds of expletives about “what the !\$*! were you thinking!” ” Here, the employee clearly admits to some error, but implies that instruction rather than verbal assault is a more appropriate managerial response. Yelling, belittling, name-calling, and throwing objects characterize managerial reactions that represent this symptom. In some cases, the manager displays multiple symptoms in a single temper

tantrum, as reported by one employee who said, "I didn't put the phone number on the right side of the file (I put it on the left). He threw the file at me and told me I was an idiot. I then quit!" In this exchange, the employee reached the limit and chose to terminate the employment relationship rather than cope with the boss.

Moody

The desire for a stable and predictable working environment is upset when the boss is moody. One employee stated that the manager would "change office policy to suit his mood." Another boss was reported to be "civil in the morning, but rude and abrupt in the afternoon." This constantly changing environment leaves employees "tip-toeing on eggshells." Furthermore, some employees attribute the cause of moodiness to factors other than work and that the employees suffer for no good reason, as illustrated by the employee that said, "My supervisor comes to work in a bad mood and takes it out on workers." The perception that the manager is "taking it out on employees" suggests that, once again, employees are subjected to needless and unjustified anguish.

Arrogance

The epitome of disrespect may occur when managers project themselves as better than others, either intentionally or unintentionally. Employees perceive arrogance in a manager through what is said and how it is said through both tone and body language. One employee said of his boss, "...instead of talking to me like a human being, he lets me know who is in charge and what he is going to make me do." Another supervisor was quoted, "This is the way I do it. So do it my way because that is the right way." Most interpretations of arrogance are not so direct. Other examples of arrogance make attributions such as "he thought he was the all-knowing authority" and "he acted as if he knew everything about everything." One employee resolved that "Everything is fine as long as you tell them (manager) how smart they are and that they are right." These reflections suggest that employees take offense when the manager's words and action indicate an air of superiority.

Sarcasm

One employee described how bad it felt "being the target of my supervisor's sarcasm, ridicule, and other types of put-downs." While few people actually used the word sarcasm to describe these rude managerial behaviors, the set of behaviors that represent this symptom of incivility include malicious, spiteful or generally unpleasant words that are perceived by the recipient as hurtful and cutting. One employee expressed sarcasm as her supervisor's practice of "talking down to me or worse, some kind of cutesy language..." Another employee noted "snide comments" of her supervisor. One employee spoke very frankly, commenting that "[the boss] was a smart ass." The use of derisive and cutting language is clearly a violation of acceptable social behavior.

Inappropriate joking

Supposedly laughter is the best medicine, but when managers use humor inappropriately, employees do not think it funny. Some joking is intentional and scathing, such as the case of the employee who said her boss "...would tease me in front of customers." Other forms of joking may not be intentional, but the effect on the employee remains negative. For example, one employee wrote, "My boss would always give me a hard time about my hours, even though he knew that I always arrived before anyone else in the sales office (I was usually ten minutes early) and I never left before I was supposed to. He would probably describe it as "just messing with you", but I felt it was unprofessional and I never looked forward to this behavior." Mocking behaviors need not be direct to have an adverse impact on an employee. One employee explained how the boss was "Poking fun or snidely impersonating another worker in my presence.... I figured he did the same about me when I wasn't around."

Acts of Omission

Unappreciative of employee effort

The manager that is too busy or chooses not to recognize the efforts of employees is missing an opportunity to create goodwill with a minimal investment. Comments such as "...barely recognizes me" and "...never a pat on the back for a job well done" were commonly cited by employees as examples of rude behavior. "We were short-handed, so I came in early every day that summer, and no one recognized it." "[The boss]...used my idea and never gave me credit." Employees expect recognition for exceptional effort and remember when it is not received. It is not only the exceptional effort that goes unrecognized, but the absence of daily pleasantries such as "...can't say please or thank you."

Unrealistic expectations for employee accomplishment

When communications are inadequate or fail, employees may feel as if the manager's expectations are unrealistic. One such comment was that the boss "didn't explain the tasks clearly, and then get upset when they are not done correctly." The worker who said, "[the boss] was telling me to work faster when I was going as fast as I could go" may not understand performance requirements. Unrealistic expectations are not all rooted in communication failures. Fair treatment was the plea of the worker who said, "[the manager] expects good workers to do their job and the jobs of others." Another person wanted unity of command and expressed frustration in that "three bosses wanted three different things done thirty minutes ago!" Sometimes it is just the exercise of common sense that is missing, as was the case of the employee who said, "I had been working for 6 hours as a cashier and when I asked to take a break, I was told if I took a break I would be fired."

Insensitive to employee needs and concerns

Employees want to feel as if their happiness is important. One employee complained, “Supervisors tend to forget when you told them about a schedule change, or when you said you would be taking that long awaited vacation. Therefore when it comes time to leave the office for a few days, you get a nice big guilt trip about how there are too many things going on in the office for you to leave hanging.” Employees want to be involved, especially when their job is concerned, as evidenced by the worker who said, “[The boss] did not explaining why a decision was made, even though it affected my job.” Another employee said, “After three months, the boss didn’t even know my name” indicating a desire for belonging and recognition. Employees want to be considered, and not have a boss that “would wait until the night before to give me my schedule for the week.” Finally, employees have feelings and are offended by the manager that “announced a layoff by saying they were letting all of the unimportant people go.”

Unconcerned with employee work/life balance

A very common complaint is “My manager thinks my job comes before my family.” Employees relish time off, resent intrusions into their personal time, and are threatened by managerial insinuations that the employee does not take his/her job seriously. But more than that, workers have a life away from their jobs and expect respect for their personal duties, responsibilities, and desires. Intrusions by the boss that “would call me on my day off to ask about things at work—things he knew” are unacceptable. One employee recounted the time when his wife needed emergency surgery and the boss refused to let him off. The boss supposedly said, “There is nothing you can do. The doctor doesn’t need your help.” This blatant disregard for personal matters leaves a bad taste in the mouths of employees.

Shows favoritism when assigning schedules

Managers who are inattentive to scheduling and workload assignment may find themselves perceived as playing favorites. It is not only in the choice assignments, but also in the overuse of superior or dependable employees. One employee said, “I was always asked to fill in or do extra work. I asked him about it one day, and he said he did it because he could count on me. I appreciate those kind words, but he should’ve spread the work around a little better.” Another employee stated, “I was always the one assigned to work late, weekends, holidays, or during lunch when the need arises.” As often, hours and schedule assignment problems are perceptions of who gets what and why. One employee wrote, “When my supervisor would make the schedule for the week out, she would always put the more experienced workers during her shifts, and during my shifts she would put the new very inexperienced workers and often leave me short handed.” Another said, “The boss has certain pets that get hours to work and weekends off when they want them.” Finally, traditional practices that appear to working against an employee can cause a perception of unfair treatment. One employee wrote, “I was

given jobs that the new employees were supposed to do even though I had been working there longer than some other employees.”

Prevention and Treatment

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Avoiding contagious diseases should begin with a screening process designed to detect and eliminate the threat of disease carriers from entering the organization. To insure corporate civil health, those responsible for hiring must understand the importance the organization places on civil behavior. In the hiring process, emphasizing civility as an important selection criterion should be included in the selection screening process. In checking references, inquiries should be made that target potential signs of patterns of incivility. Ensuring extensive background checks are performed and requiring interpersonal skill proficiency will help prevent the virus from taking hold of the organization and the devastating results to the instigators, targets and the organization itself (Forni, 2003).

Negative workplace behaviors often become life-style responses and can be relatively enduring and difficult to change and as such, screening for difficult people like “Sherman Tanks” who bully and intimidate subordinates or “Snipers” who use sarcasm, prevents the organizational damage their presence can cause (Raynes, 1997). According to Johnston (2000), workplace bullying by managers is four times more prevalent than illegal discrimination and harassment and yet, there are no laws to cover it. Unfortunately, nastiness isn’t illegal. Cortina (2001) reported 71 percent of employees experiencing some form of workplace incivility instigated by as many as one-third of the most powerful individuals within their organizations, and rude people are three times more likely to be in a higher position than their targets.

Initial screening these managers out would have aided in preventing the losses associated with uncivil behavior. That these losses can be enormous is suggested by Pearson and Porath’s (2005) surveys, in which 53 percent of the respondents reported lost work time worrying about the incident or future interaction; 46 percent contemplated changing jobs to avoid the instigator; 37 percent reduced their commitment to the organization; 28 percent lost work time avoiding the instigator, 22 % decreased their effort at work, 12 % actually changed jobs to avoid the instigator; and 10 percent decreased the amount of time they spent at work.

Similar results were found by Forni (2003), with more than one-third curtailing their effort at work and 10 percent calling in sick. “My manager had me fire a good employee just to see if I had the strength to do it,” the employee cried, “I quit!” (Williams, 2001). With the average cost of replacing a worker about \$10,000 and sick leave about \$700 a year per worker, screening would have been wise investment. According to Diane Shilant, “I quit a job at [a firm] in Georgia because the new manager was a pathological liar... she went from employee to employee spreading lies... I had to get out to get some peace” (Stout, 2005).

Another approach to the screening is regular audits of the work environment, because many victims do not report the behavior— they just leave and organizations are unaware of it until it is too late. Rude and uncivil behavior must be recognized as an unacceptable threat and as such, uncovered and eradicated, just like a disease.

Screening for “Affleunza” can also prove beneficial for the workplace, since it has been determined that the presence of this virus can lower an organizations resistance to the Rude Flu. Affluenza is the 20th century epidemic of overwork and excessive stress, where worth and success is intrinsically tied to money and return on Investment, rather than achievement. It raises the standard for arrogance and excuses bad behavior as long as there is success, without thought of the long term consequences (Gonthier, 2002). It’s better known victims include Andrew Fastow of Enron, who regularly flew into anger; Harold Geneen of ITT, who publicly humiliated his employees; and Al Dunlap of Sunbeam, who subjected his employees to profane, abusive tirades, as well as the countless managers and supervisors below them caught in the downward civility spiral.

Screening for “Affluenza” and identifying and dealing with this potentially deadly virus can reduce the organizations susceptibility to the “Rude Flu”. Careful screening is also imperative because it is so very contagious. A recent Yale survey showed that 12 percent of employees surveyed feel that workplace wrongdoing by major institutions like Enron and Arthur Anderson have made them worry about the integrity of their own company’s leadership and is undermining performance as well as stock price; so like second-hand smoke – they still get the disease unless it is screened out!

You can help prevent the “Rude Flu” by getting immunized with a “Civility Training” vaccine. This begins with a commitment to a corporate civility policy that is communicated top-down to each and every employee in the organization. Management training should include appropriate interpersonal skills and relationship awareness according to accepted and expected civil behavior. Organizational standards of behavior should be clearly communicated and organizational practices of civil behavior strictly enforced. Best practices should be rewarded and unacceptable practices should be disciplined. Each organizational member should understand what constitutes acceptable behavior and the decisive actions the organizations will take in dealing with unacceptable behavior.

The highly contagious nature of this disease makes it especially important to clarify the organization’s expectations regarding interpersonal interactions and document uncivil managerial behaviors despite the employee’s position or clout and, as with any contagious disease, a quick response is essential. It is time to get the “Rage-oholics” managers of the workplace (a mutation of the “Rude Flu”) into a 12-Step Program before the disease takes over.

The businesses best equipped to prevent further occurrences in the workplace are those that have firm and decisive mechanisms for dealing with the problem. This will also help combat the problems stemming from the fact that, while most managers can easily recognize uncivil behavior in other employees, they fail to actually recognize it in

themselves and allows organization to recognize and monitor managerial behavior. Sprint, Glaxco Wellcome and Nortel are just a few of the companies now taking very seriously the expectations of behavior among managers and employees, holding them accountable and reaping the benefits (Pearson, 2005). Rather than addressing the crises after they take place, they are putting in place a system that will make the crises occur less often (Fomi, 2005).

Uncivil workplace experiences were also found to be associated with complications such as greater psychological distress (Cortina, 2001), and the cost associated with stress in the workplace are well documented. According to research published in "Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine", employees' blood pressure rose when they were managed by someone they considered unreasonable. Unfair bosses can drive up their employees' blood pressure; thereby increasing their long-term risks of a heart attack or stroke. The rise was such that it represented a 16 percent increase risk of coronary heart disease and 38 percent increase risk of a stroke! (MIN, 2003) To further muddy the waters, there is a rise in the number of employees who "Sue for Flu", charging the company infected them, and workers compensation claims based on stress in the workplace.

Another complication of untreated "Rude Flu" is the actual mutation of the virus from remaining unchecked to the point of becoming malignant. That's often demonstrated by the "spiral" into worse behaviors as described by one employee who says his manager, known as Fang, mutates into a werewolf, "When the moon is full he stops shaving, grows fangs and howls at everyone he sees".

"Rude Flu" vaccine is reformulated every year because the virus changes or mutates in ways that make a previous year's vaccine ineffective. Rude and uncivil behaviors in the workplace mutate similarly in that technology is contributing to new avenues for spreading infectious bad behavior. As e-mail, instant messages, text messages, and voice mail proliferate, so does the capacity for new forms of unacceptable behaviors. Not only do these technological innovations allow for the increased incident of "Rude Flu", but the speed at which the virus may spread has also increased. Organizations must stay on top of these technological advancements to insure that corporate users of these services maintain an acceptable level of civility, because interactions across these media can be copied, forwarded, and spread to the far ends of the organization and beyond.

These complications are taking their toll on the workplace. According to a Gallup Organization survey of 1,000,000 people, "If a company is losing people, the primary cause is their manager... the top reason given for leaving their job was their immediate supervisor. The survey also notes these organizations are 50 percent less productive and 44 percent less profitable. Almost half of the respondents said they would fire their bosses if they could, and 71 percent of those are currently looking for a new job in response to a problem with their boss" (Cullen, 2005). According to Randall Hansen, formerly of People Magazine, "I had a manager we all referred to as 'Napoleon Pete'...and little by little just about every member of the department left" (Hansen,

2002). Job-seekers join great companies but leave because of bad managers. People aren't loyal to companies any more; they are loyal to people they like. No one wants a communicable disease!

However, the worst case complications may actually be financially devastating to the organization and personally fatal to the manager. According to Forni (2003), most acts of workplace violence originate with uncivil behavior. Workplace incivility sometimes initiates a spiral into workplace violence that for 1,000 people a year ends in death at work and results in a financial cost of 4.2 billion dollars a year to organizations (Hutton, 2006), giving "Death By Work" a whole new meaning! That incivility is a precursor to a chain reaction leading to violence should be reason enough for the organization to take it seriously; not to mention the savings the organization could realize by mitigating what could have initially been like many fatal diseases: preventable. If unable to treat the disease, surgery to remove the virus is also an option. While surgery is a radical procedure, incivility in the workplace just carries too high a price in both human and financial terms to allow it to continue. According to one Glaxco Wellcome executive, "We'd rather risk the law suit from terminating one manager than the destruction of our entire corporate culture from letting them stay on".

Incivility has reached the crises stage lately, and its impact on productivity, morale, retention rates and profits are reaching epidemic proportions. Worse yet, it has been discovered to be an airborne disease, as witnesses or bystanders to workplace incivility are infected and much like the bird flu, can infect other populations. "Patterns of incivility cascade downward and self-perpetuate" (Pearson); so it moves from the manager to the employee and out to other co-workers and associates. Given the fact that the "Rude Flu" is quickly becoming the organizational pandemic of the new millennium, if left unchecked it may become the leading cause of "death" in the workplace.

Immunization efforts must flow top-down. Corporate executives must champion civil behavior among all organizational employee, because the containment of the "Rude Flu" is intricately linked to their ethical behavior and leadership. Ethical behavior can be defined as actions that one ought to do. The fiduciary responsibility of corporate leaders is to behave in a manner that will increase the value of the company. Because the impact of uncivil work place behaviors has been shown to have an adverse affect on productivity and profitability, it logically follows that corporate leaders have a fiduciary responsibility to exhibit civil corporate behave so as not to hinder productivity and profitability. This reasoning clearly places the responsibility for reducing and eliminating uncivil work place behaviors in the hands of corporate managers. If managers fail to consider the effects of uncivil behavior in the workplace and neglect to deal with it accordingly, it will become worse, an epidemic, not just the "Rude Flu" but all out rampant "Meaningitis"!!

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Note: Title cartoon drawn by Carole E. Scott

