

INTRODUCTION

IN 2003, DAVID TRUMBELL landed a challenging, well-paying job with a Fortune 500 telecommunications firm. Although the firm had interviewed many qualified candidates, Dave's enthusiasm and can-do spirit made him the company's first choice. Once he was on the job, Dave's prospects seemed bright. His new colleagues were sure that he would succeed. Less than two months later, however, he left the firm. The reason? Poor behavior—not his, but that of his new colleagues. “Leaders ran around shouting at people,” Dave reported. “Employees took out their frustrations on each other. It sure wasn't what I was looking for in a job. Who treats people that way?”

American business has an incivility problem, and it's getting worse. Tune into interactions in many workplaces today and you'll spot employees speaking to subordinates in condescending tones, ignoring e-mail or phone messages, claiming excessive credit for their team's accomplishments, browsing on their iPhones or texting during meetings, and leaving malfunctioning office equipment for the next user to fix. About one-fourth of workers we polled in 1998 said they were treated rudely once or more per week; by 2005 that number had risen to nearly half. An astonishing 95 percent of workers in 2005 reported experiencing incivility from their coworkers. A recent Gallup study entitled “Feeling Good Matters in the Workplace” found that 73 percent of workers don't “feel good.” Of the respondents to the Gallup poll, 14 percent say that they are actively disengaged as a result, and they

admitted to doing what they can to undermine their organizations and their coworkers. The problem of incivility in the workplace has been compounded by our increasing tolerance of nasty behavior as a culture. Witness television shows like *The Sopranos*, films such as *Borat* or *Jack-ass*, the phenomenon of road rage, or the never-ending parade of ugly incidents at high school and sporting events.

Few business leaders take the necessary steps to stop incivility. Some don't know how to do it, and most simply don't understand how much incivility is costing them. That's where this book comes in. Drawing on a decade of pathbreaking research, *The Cost of Bad Behavior* argues that petty incidences of workplace rudeness exact a staggering economic toll that managers would be foolish to ignore.

Incivility's measurable costs alone are enormous. Job stress, for instance, costs US corporations three hundred billion dollars a year¹, much of which has been shown to stem from workplace incivility. But incivility's true impact stretches far beyond that which is measurable in dollar terms. How to tally damage done by increased employee turnover, by the disruption of work teams, by the waning of helpful behavior, or by the tarnishing of corporate and individual reputations? As our research shows, incivility unleashes a set of complicated and destructive dynamics on individuals, teams, and organizations that impede performance and create organizational dysfunction on a number of levels, leading to diminished financial results. Far from a minor inconvenience to millions of American workers, workplace incivility is one of today's most substantial economic drains on American business, a largely preventable ill that begs to be addressed.

Where We're Coming From

We're not prim and proper manners crusaders. We're business school professors, one of us (Pearson) at the Thunderbird School of Global Business, the other (Porath) at the University of Southern California. We have devoted a good part of our careers to researching, writing, consulting on, and teaching about the subject.

We didn't set out to study workplace incivility. What we wanted to do, more than a decade ago, was identify workplace homicide's early warning signs. We suspected that disrespectful words and thoughtless deeds among employees bore the seeds from which violence grows. To our surprise, we found that although low-intensity bad behavior can help explain violence, it hardly ever causes it. Our hypothesis didn't pan out, but we discovered something else: that expensive but largely unseen side effects occur when one employee treats another in a disrespectful way—that is, “uncivilly.”



Serious costs associated with incivility existed in virtually every organization that we studied. People who experienced incivility were affected deeply, and nearly everyone took action to get even. Targeted employees at all levels intentionally lowered their productivity, cut back work hours, lost respect for their bosses, put in minimal acceptable effort, and sometimes even left their jobs—all because of disrespectful words or deeds. Yet uncivil behavior barely registered as damaging on managers' radar. How could this be? Simple: The organizations we studied did not recognize the economic consequences of incivility, track them, or include them in accounting tallies.

What made the costs associated with incivility especially noteworthy was another finding of ours: that incivility was far more widespread than anybody had anticipated. Gathering experiences and observations from eight hundred employees in the United States, we asked them: Had incivility entered their interactions with their coworkers? The answer was a resounding yes. One in five claimed to be the target of incivility from a coworker at least once per week. About two-thirds told us

that they saw incivility occurring among other employees no less than once a month. Ten percent said that they witnessed incivility among their colleagues every single day.

Initially, we wondered whether a me-first attitude on the part of some American workers might have skewed their perspectives. American workers, we thought, may have been too sensitive or demanding about their treatment at work. To test our caveat, we went on to gather views from across the border, where residents were perceived as less self-centered and better mannered. We polled 125 white-collar employees in Canada, asking them whether employee-to-employee incivilities had entered their work lives. The answer, again, was a resounding yes; in fact workplace experiences reported by Canadians were even worse than those reported in our own country. Half of the Canadians told us that they suffered incivility directly from their fellow employees at least once per week. Ninety-nine percent said that they witnessed incivility at work. One in four reported seeing incivility occurring between other colleagues every day.

If we had any lingering doubts that incivility was a widespread and tremendously costly workplace phenomenon, these were finally removed by the public response to our work. Within days of the first media reports about our research, we were swamped with phone calls, e-mail inquiries, and requests for interviews from reporters around the globe. Our findings were covered in more than 450 newspapers and magazines across the English-speaking world. Subsequent findings prompted interviews with television and radio networks in the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, and France. We also received a flood of queries from strangers who had been targets of incivility in their own workplaces. Many told us about incidents that caused them to leave their jobs. Some still felt as if they were held hostage, unable to continue working at all. Some were relieved to learn that their strong reactions to the “little” injustices of incivility were not unique.

We didn’t anticipate the breadth and depth of responses that our work had stirred, but this feedback only fueled us to dig deeper and look closer. We’ve since spent a decade gathering data about workplace



incivility. We've interviewed employees, managers, executives, presidents, and CEOs. We've administered questionnaires, run experiments, led workshops, observed and consulted doctors, lawyers, law enforcement officers, managers, and executives as they planned for and dealt with contentious employees and clients. All told, we've gathered information from more than nine thousand people nationwide. Participants have told us about their uncivil experiences as targets, managers, leaders, witnesses, and offenders. They've described how incivility unfolds, how managers respond, how organizations react, how witnesses behave, and how targets feel. They've even shared their very valuable insights into how to curtail incivility, insights *The Cost of Bad Behavior* in turn shares with you.

This Book's Architecture

We've written *The Cost of Bad Behavior* to be concise, easy to read, and entertaining for managers and workers at all levels. We've also written it to be compelling. You'll encounter throughout a wealth of hard data drawn from our research. We will speak forthrightly, and we will speak from facts. We'll tell you all that we have learned about workplace incivility so that you can take a closer look at your own organization and your own behavior. We'll also go beyond the business world to fascinating examples of rudeness, disregard, and disrespect from popular culture and such fields as law, medicine, education, psychology, sociology, communication, marketing, and criminology.

The book is divided into three short sections. Chapters One through Four introduce the phenomenon of incivility, describing its prevalence and characteristics. Chapters Five through Eleven reveal incivility's costs: whom it hurts and how. Chapters Twelve through Seventeen describe in detail what individuals, organizations, and society as a whole can do to promote a civil environment. We've also included an Appendix for those curious about the roots of incivility. Despite their diversities of era, culture, and philosophy, historical figures as diverse as Confucius, Plato, Montezuma, and Lincoln exalted the value of civility,



as you will see in the Epilogue. As readers will discover, some of these actions are easy, and all are inexpensive when compared with incivility's tremendous costs.

Nobody wins when it comes to incivility: not the firm, not the target of incivility, not even the offender. Read this book, and you'll come to appreciate the hidden toll incivility takes in terms of reduced employee performance, increased workplace stress, reduced employee retention, reduced team performance, erosion of the firm's culture, customer flight, and damage to the firm's reputation. Yet if the picture is grim, companies are by no means doomed to suffer losses from incivility. You have at hand right now the means to substantially reduce incivility and minimize its damage. What you need is the will. To that end, we hope you will come away from this book with one inescapable conclusion, both for yourself and for your organization: There are costs for bad behavior.