On the Nature, Consequences and Remedies of Workplace Incivility:
No Time for "Nice"? Think Again

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Executive Overview

Incivility, or employees' lack of regard for one another, is costly to organizations in subtle and pervasive ways. Although uncivil behaviors occur commonly, many organizations fail to recognize them, few understand their harmful effects, and most managers and executives are ill equipped to deal with them. Over the past eight years, as we have learned about this phenomenon through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, experiments and executive forums with more than 2400 people across the U.S. and Canada, we have found that incivility causes its targets, witnesses and additional stakeholders to act in ways that erode organizational values and deplete organizational resources. Because of their experiences of workplace incivility, employees decrease work effort, time on the job, productivity and performance. Where incivility is not curtailed, job satisfaction and organizational loyalty diminish, as well. Some employees leave their jobs, solely because of the impact of this subtle form of deviance. Most of these consequences occur without organizational awareness. In addition to detailing the nature of incivility and its consequences, we provide keys to recognizing and dealing with habitual instigators, as well as remedies that are being used effectively by organizations to curtail and correct employee-to-employee incivility.

Article

Public polls suggest that incivility is on the rise. In a recent survey of more than 2,000 respondents, nearly four out of five believe that lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem; three out of five believe that it is getting worse.[1] Within the workplace, a substantial percentage of employees see themselves as targets of such rudeness.[2] When we polled nearly 800 employees in the US-, ten percent reported witnessing incivility daily within their workplaces and twenty percent said that they, personally, were the direct targets of incivility at work at least once per week (for further details about the research stream underlying this article, please see the Appendix). In another study that we conducted with 126 Canadian white-collar employees, one-fourth reported witnessing incivility daily and one-half said that they were the direct targets of incivility at least once per week.[3]

Some experts suggest that the complexity of fast-paced, high-tech, global interactions feeds incivility because people believe that they don't have the time to be 'nice', that impersonal modes of contact do not require courtesies of interaction, and that differ-

ences in cultural norms foster miscommunication that can infer rudeness. Others contend that today's casual workplaces may increase incivility because they leave fewer cues for appropriate interpersonal behavior. Further, it has been suggested elsewhere that new forms of psychological contracts and a 'me first' attitude may erode civility as enduring mutual commitments and requisite forms of respect wane.[4]

For some, incivility has become a regular occurrence at work, whether by witnessing it, experiencing it first-hand, or perpetrating it. Examples abound as reflected by our qualitative data: a boss rebukes his subordinate for wasting paperclips in front of half a dozen colleagues; a salesperson makes sarcastic remarks about another employee in front of a customer; or when asked for extra help, a receptionist refuses flatly, suggesting that she deserves to spend the rest of the afternoon reading her *People* magazine. As for attempting to confront these types of circumstances, some employees have told us that they would be laughed out of the office. As a result, we have found that some employees accept or ignore the incivilities, some collude with them, and others perpetuate them.

Some organizational scientists consider the prevalence and costs of workplace deviance among the most serious dilemmas facing organizations today.[5] For some versions of deviance, like sexual harassment, employees are trained to recognize and deal with them, organizations have policies and mechanisms to address them, and laws back them up. But, there is another kind of harassment that occurs regularly in many organizations as employees display lack of regard for others in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect, with or without conscious intent. This form of workplace deviance is not illegal, many companies fail to recognize it, and most managers are ill equipped to deal with it. It is called incivility and it is defined as low intensity deviant behavior that violates workplace norms for mutual respect and may or may not be intended to harm the target.[6] Low intensity connotes verbal rather than physical, passive rather than active, and indirect rather than direct.[7]

For those managers and executives who believe that the effects of intraorganizational incivility are inconsequential, we recommend logging the amount of time spent resolving conflicts among workers. For typical Fortune 1000 firms, such activities may account for as much as 13% of their executives' time, or nearly seven weeks per year per executive.[8] Even if managers and executives are not wasting their time consoling and mediating, our research shows that incivility corrodes organizational culture and that employees who are on the receiving end will respond in ways that are costly to their organizations. Through questionnaires, interviews and experimental studies, we have found that incivility diminishes individuals' productivity, performance, motivation, creativity and helping behaviors. The sting of incivility has emotional and behavioral impact on its targets, as well as those who witness, hear about or initiate it as the spillover erodes values and depletes resources.

For the past eight years, we (with Andersson at Temple University, and Wegner at UNC) have studied the uncivil experiences of more than 2,400 workers, managers and executives in the US and Canada who represent organizations in all industrial classifications, ranging in size from two to more than 100,000 employees (please see Appendix for further details). Through our ongoing research with executives, managers and employees, we have sought to reflect and encompass the subtle contexts and challenges of incivility, and to establish the nature of organizational, group and individual costs, as well as to uncover the best practices used to address the phenomenon. We have collected data in focus groups, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, experiments, and executive

forums. The results are clear: incivility is costly to organizations and their members in subtle but pervasive ways that can include decline in job satisfaction, fading of organizational loyalty and loss of leadership impact.

Our goals in this article are to provide insight about the nature and costs of workplace incivility and to offer practical approaches that organizations can adopt to curtail and manage the phenomenon.

Incivility: A Glimpse into Its Nature and Consequences

The basis for civility is demonstration of respect, as Carter has contended in *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy*.[9] Incivility, by contrast, implies rudeness and disregard for others in a manner that violates norms for respect. Although organizational research regarding incivility specifically is still in a preliminary phase, its roots can be traced to phenomena of spiraling interpersonal conflict and escalating aggression. Studies show that low intensity aggression in the workplace can lead to an upward spiral, resulting in increased aggression and more purposeful efforts to harm one another.[10]

Recent research indicates that incivility is widespread in the workplace. In a study conducted by Cortina and her colleagues, nearly three-fourths of respondents reported experiencing incivility at work at least once in the past five years.[11] In another study, researchers found that more than half of the front-line workers they surveyed had experienced forms of incivility at least once in the previous three years.[12] Within the healthcare profession, a study of 603 nurses revealed that one-third had experienced verbal abuse in the previous five days.[13]

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint the costs of incivility. To the best of our knowledge, the financial burdens of incivility have never been calculated either in a specific work setting, or across organizations. However, because some of the effects on individual employees are the same, calculations regarding sexual harassment might make an interesting starting point for comparison. Among the Fortune 500, the annual cost of sexual harassment has been estimated to exceed $6 million per company in absenteeism, lost productivity and turnover alone.[14] For the purpose of this comparison, it is crucial to note that this figure does not include the great financial burdens of settlement costs, lawsuits and legal fees, the indirect costs of a tarnished organizational reputation, nor the time spent managing the situation.

Incivility and sexual harassment have similar characteristics (and associated costs) in regard to the loss of target time, productivity and turnover. There are many ways in which they differ; some may actually raise the ante for incivility. Laws do not exist regarding incivility, so the risk of bringing complaints to the surface is high. As a result, incivility and its repercussions generally occur without organizational awareness. Although the effects of incivility often go unnoticed by the organization and unreported by the target, they are rarely unrequited. The means of getting even when incivility occurs are often enacted covertly, so they are extremely hard to quantify. Absent the procedures to control sexual harassment that are in place in most workplaces, incivility is also more likely to spread. Incivility tends to be more difficult to detect and curtail than sexual harassment because it resides in the eyes of the beholder. Although an individual may experience an uncivil comment or deed as purposefully offensive, the instigator may deny any negative intent. Instead, the offender may claim that the target was simply too sensitive or that his words or behaviors were meant in jest. These differences

may suggest different actions for those seeking to curtail or contain incivility, as we will discuss later.

Despite the prevalence of incivility and its damaging impact, organizational responses are spotty, at best. Some managers ignore incivility because they do not want to get involved in messy interpersonal conflict; some never hear about the incidents or, if they do, they discount their importance as so-called personal matters. Others permit or even reward brutal confrontation among employees as a key to competitive advantage. But, if rude words and subtle negative behaviors are overlooked, they can bear heavily on targets, their coworkers, their family and friends, their organizations and their customers.

Our research shows that when targets believe that someone at work has treated them disrespectfully, half will lose work time worrying about future interactions with the instigator, and half will contemplate changing jobs to avoid a recurrence. One-fourth of research respondents who feel that they have been treated uncivilly will intentionally cut back their work efforts. A few will steal from their instigators or their organizations. Some will sabotage equipment. Most will tell friends, family and colleagues about how badly they have been treated.[15]

In the worst case, some targets of incivility will exit. Among survey respondents, one target in eight will leave the job to escape a troublesome uncivil situation.[16] With fully-loaded costs of turnover estimated at 1.5 to 2.5 times the salary paid for the job, or $50,000 per exiting employee across all jobs and industries in the U.S.,[17] the bottom-line effects of incivility are far from trivial. It is important to note that departures driven by incivility may follow an incident immediately or they may come after some time has elapsed. This finding is critical to managers because, in regard to organizational memory, a delayed reaction will tend to disassociate the exit from the uncivil event.

In the most extreme cases, incivility can lead to workplace aggression and violence. It is highly unlikely that a disgruntled ex-employee will return as a workplace avenger; but experts on workplace violence caution that treating employees with anything less than respect and dignity at all times increases the odds of an aggressive response.[18]

Key Players: Target, Instigator and Others
When we began our research, we anticipated that the target of workplace incivility would be someone characteristically vulnerable: a newcomer to the organization, who would probably be young, female and in a position of lower status than the instigator. Only one of these assumptions held true. Age and tenure differences between target and instigator are minimal. Also, men are just as likely to be targets of incivility, although they are far more likely instigators than women are. Power plays the central role: a target is much more likely to be of lower status than the instigator, whether or not in a direct reporting line.

Some of our most recent research reflects the instigator's perspective. We have learned that almost everyone admits to behaving disrespectfully at work…occasionally. Virtually everyone we have interviewed or surveyed has admitted to occasional episodes of uncivil behavior toward coworkers. Occasionally, employees treat lower-level workers as if they were invisible, act annoyed when someone asks for a favor, belittle their bosses behind their backs, or take colleagues' contributions for granted. Once in a while, most individuals disregard their coworkers in supposedly inconsequential ways. Despite the low intensity of these behaviors, however, we have found that they can erode relationships and detract from organizational outcomes, even when occurrences are rare and followed by apologies, rationalizations or efforts to make amends. But, the grave danger regarding

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incivility lurks in the behaviors of habitual instigators.

In some organizations, a few people seem to maintain and even accumulate power when behaving disrespectfully. Those who have taken part in our research believe that some individuals who do so regularly are treated differently in their organizations. In some cases, habitual instigators seem to be held above reproach, despite their displays of disrespect for others. In the eyes of their targets, witnesses and others throughout the organization, habitual instigators seem to get away with uncivil incidents because of their special competencies or their access to organizational power. In some workplaces, instigators develop predictable patterned uncivil behaviors. Repeatedly, they may be rude to their peers, demean their subordinates, and lash out at the first employees that cross their paths when a problem occurs. In some settings, organizational tolerance for such incivility can endure throughout an instigator's career, despite widespread aware-ness of these patterns by the employees working with them.

A repeated theme in interviews and focus groups that we conducted with managers and executives, as well as doctors, nurses, attorneys, lawyers, judges, line workers, first-line supervisors and other professionals regards inequity. Research participants note that habitual instigators in their organizations get away with their uncivil behaviors without repercussion. An example of a senior-level habitual instigator drawn from our field observations illustrates the nature of incivility and its potential impact, as well as the variety of targets that can be affected directly. Within the course of one work day, the uncivil professional-level employee: insulted three administrative support personnel; rep-rimanded another for an error that she had not made; berated a colleague while imply-ing ungrounded accusations and implicit career threats; erroneously admonished another administrator, adding that he would track her down and ruin her career if she reported his behavior. When a senior level colleague of the instigator attempted to come to the targets' rescue, the instigator threatened physical attack.

In this case, the habitual instigator's behaviors escalated from incivility to aggression within sight or sound of several of his peers. Some shut their office doors, others later reported that they knew what was happening but did not want to get involved. Eventually, rather than dealing with the instigator directly, several of his senior level peers reported the incivilities to the organization's leader. As recourse, the head of the organization counseled the instigator to be more careful, urging him to recognize that his continued career ascent could be stifled by how he treated "the little people." No action was taken by the organization to acknowledge or address the effects on targets. No record was made of the inappropriate behaviors. No standards were set for the insti-gator's future behavior. This example constitutes an extreme coincidence of habitual incivility and inept leadership. Often, we find these elements coupled.

Individual Characteristics: Status and Gender
The nature and movement of incivility are affected by status. Through in-depth inter-views, we learned that those with greater power have more ways to be uncivil and get away with it. In sum, the uncivil behaviors of lower level employees are curtailed to covert omission. They may selectively ignore requests or delay assistance, or they may intentionally forget to replenish dwindling resources or covertly sabotage equipment. But, if an instigator's job is nearer the top of the organization, there are more opportuni-ties to be uncivil at will. Examples of the effect of status differential are present across our research studies. Greater power allows people to keep others waiting, disrupt meet-

ings, speak in condescending words and tone, and interrupt others' tasks and conversations, seemingly without repercussion. As we have heard regarding numerous organizational settings, if the instigator is a strong enough cog in the organizational machine, he or she may even get away with staging public temper tantrums when unhappy.

To make matters worse, top-down incivility can start a self-reinforcing cycle. If incivility is committed downward, hierarchical differences can make the incident seem inconsequential. The instigator's higher position may become a protective shield as his or her words or deeds reinforce silence. Scarce are the lower status employees who will risk job and paycheck to tell the more powerful instigator that he or she has offended them. As an employee in manufacturing summed it up for us, "given the difference in our positions, saying anything wasn't going to work. He had senior management in his pocket."

Lest prospective instigators take some bizarre resolve in the privileges of rank, they, too, should beware. We have found that even members of the power elite do not get away with incivility scot-free. Those with less power tend to retaliate in less aggressive ways. When in a one-down situation, rather than blowing the whistle or retaliating directly, targets that seem to ignore an instigator's rudeness may actually be doing what they can to spoil the individual's reputation or covertly botch tasks that are important to the instigator. About a third of the people who are targets of incivility will spread rumors about instigators and withhold information that their offenders may need. Twenty percent of targets will belittle instigators behind their backs and delay actions on their requests. More than one third of targets will go out of their way to avoid their instigators, thereby ceasing efforts that they might have made formerly on the instigator's behalf. Like others in less powerful predicaments, the lower level targets of incivility will act in ways mindful of the ability of the powerful individual to harm the less powerful person's career.[19]

If the instigator seems too powerful, many targets will seek retribution by engaging in deviant behaviors that adversely affect the organization. They may intentionally decrease the effort, time and quality that they put into their work, all to the detriment of the organizational bottom-line. Often, they do these things carefully, in ways that are undetectable to the organization in the short-term. Taking action against the organization rather than the instigator may reflect a desire for greater safety through anonymity, as suggested by Aquino and his colleagues.[20]

While we learned early that the occurrence of workplace incivility is an equal opportunity offense (that is, we found men as likely as women to be targets), we wondered how gender might affect the responses of targets. Abundant literature suggests that men and women experience the workplace differently. We found that, in many ways, differences in the responses of men versus women who perceive themselves as targets of incivility parallel results of earlier work examining aggression and power as related to gender.

Tannen and others have contended that men are more likely to take aggressive stances or attack an antagonist verbally when they have been insulted.[21] Scholars have long contended that differences in gendered styles bear heavily on our abilities to access and use power.[22] In a recent study, Cortina and colleagues found that female attorneys who had experienced incivility or unwanted sexual attention were more likely than their male colleagues to rely on coping strategies, mobilizing social support and turning to social networks.[23] Women explain this behavior by stressing how much they dislike conflict.[24] Other scholars have suggested that levels of aggressiveness or passive-aggressiveness differ between men and women [25], and that women have a greater tendency to

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avoid conflict.[26] Recently, in *Disappearing Acts*, Fletcher has shown that women will tend to purposefully disappear themselves in response to conflict, rather than take an aggressive posture. Based on this work, we use the term "disappearing oneself" to connote intentionally removing oneself from a relationship or contact with someone, as a means of ceasing mutual engagement and empathy. [27]

We learned that when incivility occurs male targets will be more likely to engage in direct, overt retribution against their instigators. When the target is a man, the incivility spiral will grow in intensity, especially if the instigator is also a man. In short, male targets of incivility will strive to get even.

In contrast, when the target is a woman, she will tend to try to avoid the instigator, or when complete avoidance is not possible, she will attempt to maintain her distance from the instigator. Also, female targets will be less likely to spread the word about the uncivil behavior within the organization. Rather, women who are targets of incivility will confide in family and friends outside the organization. Although women do not tend to respond with overt, immediate payback, the incident does not necessarily go unrequited. Instead, we found that female targets will tend to reinforce their support, regain their balance and recoup their strength so that they are ready to take recourse when the best opportunity arises.

Potential Outcomes: Spirals and Cascades
When incivility occurs, there are three potential outcomes for the instigator and target: they can continue to be uncivil to each other through reciprocal exchanges, they can escalate the intensity of the offense, or either party can walk away. If the choice is escalation, each round of disrespect may become more dramatic and more aggressive. In these situations, the initial spewing of uncivil words or disrespectful acts can escalate into physical aggression.

To provide an example drawn from our qualitative data, employee A forgets to acknowledge colleague B's contributions to a team project. At the next staff meeting, B takes the opportunity to criticize A's new project. Later that day, A ignores B's email request for information, so B no longer responds to A's phone messages. In the most extreme cases, this tit-for-tat behavior can intensify in successful rounds to the point of shouting matches, veiled threats, or even physical aggression.

Even if the intensity does not build, most targets will spread the news about what has happened to them. What begins between two employees spills over to people who neither took part in the initial uncivil interaction nor observed it. When people are treated rudely at work, half of them will tell a more powerful colleague about what has happened, but chances are slim that they will report the situation to anyone in the organization who has the expertise to deal with it. Many targets of incivility will share their stories with their peers or subordinates. Those who hear about the incivility may search for ways to get even on the target's behalf. Just knowing that the incivility occurred can cause third parties to deplete organizational resources, whether by withholding assistance from the instigator, tarnishing the instigator's reputation, or spreading the news further by telling additional colleagues about what has happened.

When treated disrespectfully at work, 70% of targets vent to family and friends outside the workplace. Having been treated rudely by the boss or coworkers, some employees may lash out at their spouses, humiliate their subordinates, or argue with their customers.

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Organizational Actions: Containing, Correcting and Curtailing Incivility

According to our data, only one-fourth of targets were satisfied with the way that their organizations handled the incivility that they experienced. With the potential damages of incivility and its tendency to spread, it is vital to consider how organizations might curtail disrespect and cultivate civility. To answer this question, we asked more than 600 targets about the best-case examples from their organizational experiences and we conducted field interviews with 54 managers and executives who were successfully attempting to curtail incivility in their organizations, which represented a variety of industries and were based in North America. As we looked across the data, we identified nine practices that address this challenge. Like many management tenets, they are simple to articulate but challenging to live by. We offer the suggestions that follow to those in organizations that want to contain, correct and curtail incivility.

1. Set Zero-tolerance Expectations.
Executives echo the importance of setting zero-tolerance expectations regarding employee-to-employee incivility. They contend that such expectations must be initiated from the top of the organization and that they should be repeated regularly, both verbally and in writing. Stating an organization-wide expectation of civil interactions among employees defines a wide sweeping norm and sets a baseline against which organizations can measure and correct behavior. We have found simple corporate exemplars:

- "Treat each other with respect." (from Boeing's integrity statement)
- "Above all, employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer." (from Southwest Airlines' mission statement).
- "We are responsible to our employees…We must respect their dignity." (from the Johnson & Johnson credo).
- "We treat each other with respect and dignity." (from AT&T's value statement).

Whereas many organizations create stringent guidelines about how employees should treat customers, fewer seem to articulate how employees should treat one another. It is worth noting that this lack of symmetry has the potential to damage morale and spoil customer service. Dissonance between customer treatment given and employee treatment received tends to place a burden squarely on line-level employees. When such dissonance exists, employees may be expected to buffer between catering to customers (for whom organizational guidelines may stipulate superb treatment) while being targets of their bosses' incivilities (which are generally uninhibited by organizational guidelines). Such incongruence can lead to higher turnover, poorer customer service, or both.[28]

2. Take an Honest Look in the Mirror.
Once the norm has been set, managers and executives must live by it. A place to start is with self-examination. As an early diagnostic, executives in organizations concerned about civility examine how they and their peers actually behave toward subordinates and toward one another. To gain in-depth, candid perspectives, some executives do this through peer feedback, others videotape their meetings for careful evaluation and some work with consultants. They take these steps because they believe that role modeling has

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no less impact regarding civility than any other desirable organizational characteristic. Their intuitions are supported by our data: one-fourth of those who behave uncivilly say that they do so because of their leader's uncivil behavior.

3. Weed out Trouble Before It Enters Your Organization.
Executives we polled during a learning forum told us that the easiest way to foster and reinforce civility is to hire civil employees. We know from the studies that we have conducted that habitual instigators tend to leave discernible trails of disrespectful behaviors, and that employee consensus in identifying repeat offenders can be strong. Those who chronically spew incivility tend to be known throughout their departments and, often, by subordinates and colleagues across their organizations. Despite this trend, however, our qualitative studies suggest that instigators are often passed around like organizational hot potatoes, with each manager hoping to eliminate the problem (instigator) by handing it off to another department's management.

To avoid hiring instigators, job candidates' references should be checked thoroughly, especially when the candidate will have significant organizational stature. When a search firm has been used to identify candidates, it should not be the sole source entrusted to check references of final candidates. Similarly, a reference check should not be limited to the list of contacts provided by the job candidate. Rather, those within the firm who are involved in the candidate selection process should be encouraged to talk with personal contacts at various organizational levels with whom the candidate has worked. Although this connection may sound tenuous, relevant professional and personal contacts within and across industries can generally be made with a small amount of extra effort. Those who lead companies that take incivility seriously tell us that they find it a worthwhile investment to thoroughly tap references so that they can avoid hiring habitual instigators.

4. Teach Civility.
Whereas training for sexual harassment is information-based in clarifying legal definitions, boundaries and obligations, training for civility is skill-based. In some cases, improving individual competencies such as conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, stress management, listening, and coaching can curtail incivility. Expectations regarding these skills should be tied to performance and career advancement. Expertise developed through such skills can yield additional positive impact in enhanced day-to-day dealings with coworkers and customers, as well as improved performance.[29] When we gathered data from the instigator's perspective, we found that one-fourth of the instigators we surveyed blame their uncivil behavior on lack of training. Also, many instigators claim that they behave badly because they are under too much stress and do not have time to be 'nice.' Performance-based skills training can help to alleviate these pressures, too.

5. Put Your Ear to the Ground and Listen Carefully.
Curtailing incivility may be the ultimate rationale for 360-degree feedback. By soliciting anonymous bottom-up input, managers and executives can build candid perspectives about instigators and detect patterns of incivility to root out repeat offenders and keep instigators from turning civil employees uncivil. We know from qualitative and quantitative studies that instigators who are disrespectful to their subordinates or peers are

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often seen as experts at managing upward. They may take great care in controlling their uncivil behavior so that it dodges the attention of those who have the organizational power to correct it. Managers who are concerned about incivility should seek feedback about employee-to-employee interactions and clear the path for problems to surface, whether through human relations channels or through open door policies. When reports of instigators' uncivil acts do not match managers' positive experiences of an employee, those in charge should withhold judgment, gathering additional information from lower levels of the organization to assure that savvy instigators are not feigning a positive image to a superior that those below would never recognize.

6. When Incivility Occurs, Hammer It.

Incivility ignored can fester. Incivility condoned can spawn additional incivility, whether by the original instigator (who believes that he or she is getting away with it) or by others (who watch the instigator get away with it). Even at lowest levels of the organization, incivility should be dealt with swiftly before it has time to spiral or cascade. Executives should not tolerate destructive behavior, even when it comes from the organization's power elite as it can create an association between power and incivility: employees who witness incivility that occurs without repercussions may begin to see such behavior as a way to get ahead in their organizational settings.

Sly instigators must be corrected despite their power or special skills. This may be particularly challenging because uncivil behavior tends to occur privately between instigator and target. Often, the incivility occurred within sight or earshot only of individuals with little or no power to curtail the instigator. Executives must recognize that it takes courage for a less powerful employee to come forth and surface an uncivil situation that involves a higher status individual. This leads to our next recommendation.

7. Heed Warning Signals.

Incivility thrives in environments where input from employees is squelched. Managers and leaders must weigh targets' claims carefully if they want individuals to continue to report incidents. When employees learn that no one will bother to investigate, correct or curtail the problem, they soon recognize that by speaking up they may actually increase the risk of repercussions from the instigator. A pattern emerged from our qualitative data: hopelessness about the prospects of any remedial action being taken combines with fear of repercussion from a more powerful instigator, outweighing the courage needed to voice the problem. The pervasiveness of this cycle of silence is supported by contextual data captured in our research finding: 54% of employees surveyed told us that, in their organizations, they would be likely to have career problems by reporting incivility.

8. Don't Make Excuses for Powerful Instigators.

Uncivil behavior can become endemic to organizations where it is overlooked. When we held an executive forum regarding incivility, a leading recommendation from participants was that leaders must confront all instigators, even those with special talents, with accurate critical feedback and hold them accountable for their actions despite their clout. Also, managers must be held accountable for dealing with the instigators who report to them. Despite temptation to the contrary, effective leaders cannot look the other way, nor accept a supervisor's rationale that "that's just how Joe is." After all, the

instigator has obstructed interpersonal relationships and violated company values. Behavior should be documented and appropriate disciplinary action taken. Leaders may need to terminate habitual offenders. Above all, instigators should not be relocated as this can result in infesting other areas of the organization.

This practice of relocation, however, is not uncommon. For example, consider the situation described by a human resources executive of an international airline. A habitually uncivil employee had some skills that were highly valued by the organization, but his on-going incivility offended targets, infuriated departmental colleagues, and stalled productivity. In fact, some of his associates even requested transfers or exited the organization because of the instigator's rudeness. Ultimately, department morale slipped deeply enough that the uncivil employee was transferred. His boss did not want to fire him, so he moved him. In his new environment, the instigator continued to create the same negative pattern and tarnish another department. Instead of containing the problem, the airline actually proliferated it.

9. Invest in Post-departure Interviews
For every eight employees who see themselves as the targets of incivility, one is likely to exit. To complicate matters, most of those who leave because of incivility will not report the real reason that they are exiting. Some do not tell because they think that the organization does not care; others are afraid they will sound weak if they complain. Many have reported that they remain silent because they believe that, in their organizations, the potential for negative repercussions outweighs the hope of any corrective action.

To further complicate the situation, when incivility is the reason for departure, the signals are hard to recognize. Most employees do not storm out in a huff immediately following an incident. Rather, targets of incivility have told us that they tend to remain in their jobs for months, a year, or longer, working with less effort and enthusiasm, while lining up new positions in other organizations.[30] After all, they have done nothing wrong and can take their time securing an optimal new job. Given this time gap between the incivility and the target's departure, any organizational memory that might have connected the event to the exit fades. As a result, this dramatic impact of incivility tends to leave no discernible trail. Nonetheless, facts known by departing employees are crucial to correcting incivility. To track potential incivility, organizations should conduct post-departure interviews with former employees after those employees have distanced themselves from the organization, when they are stable in their new work environments. The cost of doing so is minimal; if the organization is serious about rooting out incivility, the insight gained through candid disclosures can be invaluable.

A Case in Point
The phenomenon of workplace incivility has not yet received widespread organizational attention, and exemplary organizational practices to curtail incivility may elude some organizations. To illustrate the approaches described above, we offer a case example of an actual international pharmaceutical company (which we will call "Global Drug Co." or GDC). We believe that this organization stands as an exemplar in implementing practices that can be useful to managers and executives who wish to curtail or reduce incivility within their organization.

Before anyone is hired into GDC at any level, a thorough background check is conducted. This process includes getting in touch with personal contacts (of GDC employ-

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ees) across the industry who may know or know of the applicant. These discussions are intentionally informal, but the specific intent is to learn how others have experienced the candidate as a colleague.

Once hired, regardless of hierarchical level, every new employee of GDC must attend corporate orientation regarding organizational values, including organizational expectations about employee interactions. Specifically, people at GDC are told that they are expected to treat one another with respect. Trainers, corporate leaders and the new hires' immediate bosses communicate this value repeatedly. Also, while employed by GDC, employees at all levels receive training that fosters civil employee interactions, such as managing interpersonal dynamics, working in teams, conflict resolution and negotiation.

From orientation onward, GDC employees are assured that if they have been treated uncivilly, their situation will be assessed fairly by a GDC third party review board. If GDC employees behave uncivilly, after investigations are made, they are warned to change their behaviors during personal counseling by their direct supervisor and a GDC human relations specialist. At that time, the incident and counseling are documented in the uncivil employee's personnel file. If the incivility becomes habitual or escalates, GDC fires the instigator. GDC takes this stance regardless of the offender's stature or expertise. The leaders of GDC believe that curtailing incivility requires swift organizational action when habitually uncivil employees violate norms for mutual respect. A senior vice president of GDC shared his perspective:

> I've talked to executives in other companies who are amazed that we terminate for incivility if it happens repeatedly or becomes more intense. In their view, we risk lawsuits. But, my answer is easy, I'd rather face the possibility of a lawsuit than risk destroying our culture, devastating employee relations, or heading into an untenable situation that could become violent.

In describing the behaviors of one of GDC's highly valued research scientists and the consequences of those behaviors, the vice president continued,

> He was frustrated. It was easy to understand because in this industry it's all about innovation, and his ideas were not working out as he anticipated. But he had already received a warning about his nasty behavior toward one of our secretaries, and we take this stuff seriously, regardless of the level of the employee who is offended. The scientist came back to work one evening and, in further frustration, cursed out a colleague and then hurled a piece of equipment across the lab. We fired him on the spot, had guards escort him out of the building, and circulated his name and photo through corporate security so that he would never again be allowed on the premises. We had no choice, despite his intellectual gifts. As leaders of GDC, we're committed to this. You just can't let uncivil people destroy your organization.

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A Final Call to Action

As detailed in the appendix, we have studied the phenomenon of incivility extensively. Our interest was spawned not only by concerns that we heard in businesses with which we were working, but also by what we observed. As we searched for research underpinnings, we were drawn to diverse literatures to come at this issue from richly divergent perspectives. In closing, we offer suggestions of additional disciplines to which the intrigued reader might turn. From psychology, research concerning how interactions among individuals and their social context affect antisocial behavior[31] can be usefully applied to consider potential roots of incivility. More recently, psychologists are pinpointing the occurrences and impact of incivility at work.[32] Additional work informative for those interested in learning more about workplace incivility can be found in diverse fields, including communication, law, criminology, and gender studies.[33]

Through our stream of research on this topic, we have attempted to build a solid understanding of the nature and process of workplace incivility, as well as the precursors, consequences and contexts that surround the phenomenon. The generalizability of our work is reflected in the diverse populations from which we have gathered qualitative, quantitative and experimental data. Our attempt herein is to highlight what we have learned that we believe most relevant to those who can play a critical role in containing and curtailing workplace incivility and its consequences. We urge managers and executives to consider thoughtfully the situations in their own organizations.

Workplace incivility is a prevalent form of organizational deviance. Despite its subtle and ambiguous nature, it can be deeply and broadly detrimental. Where incivility thrives, targets suffer and organizations lose. When incivility cascades within and beyond organization boundaries, it can malign organizational interactions, tarnish the company's reputation and create spillover effects that diminish customer satisfaction and bottom line objectives. To ignore incivility invites norms that erode cooperation through unbridled individual self-interest and organizational deterioration.

Appendix—About the Research

Our incivility research comprises seven studies, six publications, twelve academic presentations and four manuscripts to date. Given the newness of the construct of incivility, our original work was exploratory as we sought to learn more about the nature and relevance of incivility at work. For two years, we (with Andersson, Temple University and Wegner, UNC) facilitated workshops and focus groups, meeting with a total of 670 voluntary participants, which included managers and executives, medical professionals, attorneys and judges across the United States. Our inquiries focused on the nature of workplace incivility that participants had experienced or witnessed, as well as the behaviors, characteristics and roles of instigators and targets. Also, we gathered information specific to the participants' own experiences of incivility, including their reactions and the responses of their organizations.

In our second study, we sought to understand and explain how incivility differed from other types of workplace aggression. We collected questionnaire data from two samples. First, a sample of 51 managers and 131 attorneys completed 16 open- and closed-ended questions, including how they defined incivility, aggression, and violence. We added a second sample of 223 employees from six Fortune 500 firms who were asked, in addition, to provide (if applicable) an open-ended description of a critical incident in which they were the target of rude, disrespectful, or insensitive behavior. This

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second sample also was asked to assess different forms of aggression of varying intensities through Likert-type scaling.

In the third study of this stream, we explored precursors, consequences, and contexts surrounding incivility at work. Early on, we made the decision to seek this information from experts whose occupations require them to deal with work-related aggression regularly. Thus, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with 24 law enforcement officers and 14 inner-city emergency medical professionals.

To validate what we believed that we had learned to this point and what we believed might be relevant to a business audience, we conducted a two-day learning forum with a dozen managers and professionals who were experts at managing workplace aggression in their own workplace settings.

Since then, we have conducted a series of studies of various types that build on this work. In our fifth study, we collected data from 101 respondents from telecommunications and pharmaceutical firms, as well as 675 alumni of a mid-Atlantic business school. Our goal was to improve our understanding of the process of incivility. Specifically, we wanted to learn how the target experiences incivility (e.g., the emotional impact of an event), and the specific consequences of incivility. Further, through these questionnaires we inquired about how contextual factors such as organizational culture, norms, and tolerance for incivility might shape the target's experience and responses. We also investigated the impact of specific individual factors such as gender and status of target and instigator.

Next, we began gathering data from the instigator's perspective to determine why incivility begins (n=125, to date). Most recently, in our seventh study, we (with Erez, University of Florida) shifted to experimental mode so that we could examine participant responses to different scenarios and staged situations of incivility within a more controlled environment (n= 418).

We focus here on highlights that we believe most applicable to practice. For those interested in additional details, we offer citations of relevant products of our work throughout the endnotes.

Figure 1

Managing Incivility: What's a Leader to Do?

Set zero-tolerance expectations.
Take an honest look in the mirror.
Weed out trouble before it enters your organization.
Teach civility.
Put your ear to the ground and listen carefully.
When incivility occurs, hammer it.
Heed warning signals.
Don't make excuses for powerful investigators.
Invest in post-departure interviews.

Endnotes
[1] Remington, R & Darden, M. 2002. *Aggravating circumstances: A status report on rudeness in America.* NYC: Public Agenda.

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[2] For further scholarly consideration of the perceived prevalence of incivility see, for example: Cortina, L.M., Magley, V.J., Williams, J.H., & Langhout, R.D. 2001. Incivility in the workplace: Incidence and impact. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 6: 64-80; Ehrlich, H.J. & Larcom, B.E.K. 1994. *Ethnoviolence in the workplace.* Baltimore, MD: Center for the Applied Study of Ethnoviolence.

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[4] For further discussion of potential causes of incivility, see for example: Andersson, , L.M., & Pearson, C.M. 1999. Tit-for-tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review.* 24 (3): 452-471.Gonthier, G. (2002), *Rude awakenings: Overcoming the incivility crisis in the workplace.* Chicago: Dearborn Trade Publishing; Morand, D.A. 1998. Getting serious about going casual on the job. *Business Horizons*, 41: 51-56. Porath, C. & Erez, A., Incivility and its effects on performance, motivation and helping behaviors (working paper, University of Southern California); Rafaeli, A., Dutton, J., Harquail, C.V. & Mackie-Lewis, S. 1997. Navigating by attire: The use of dress by female administrative employees. *Academy of Management Journal.* 40: 9-45. Roberts, M.C. 1985. A plea for professional civility. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 16(4): 474.

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[9] For a broad discussion of civility at the societal level in the U.S., see Carter, S.L. 1998. *Civility: Manners, morals, and the etiquette of democracy.*New York: Basic Books.

[10] Although workplace incivility is a relatively new scholarly construct, there is abundant research in psychology and organizational studies regarding other forms of deviance, including aggression. Among these publications, we recommend the following: Berkowitz, L. 1986. Some varieties of human aggression: Criminal violence as coercion, rule-following, impression management, and impulsive behavior. In A. Campbell & J.J. Gibbs (Eds.), *Violent transactions*: 87-103. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell; Bies, R.J. & Tripp, T.M. 1995. Beyond distrust: "Getting even" and the need for revenge. In R.M. Kramer & T.R. Tyler, *Trust in organizations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 246-260; Luckenbill, D.F. 1977. Criminal homicide as a situated transaction. *Social Problems*, 25:176-186; Tedeshi, J.T., & Felson, R.B. 1994. *Violence, aggression and coercive actions.*Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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