

RUDENESS DERAILS LEADERS

It's not just unpleasant

"I don't think I'm really a rude person, but now I see myself on television, I think, 'That is a bit strong.' And I wonder if I've always been like that and I haven't been aware of it."

Clive Anderson, Lawyer and TV host, UK

Was Clive Anderson "rude"? Many seeing him in action in the courts thought so. So, when he became a famous TV talk show host, he had the chance to see himself in action. It opened his eyes. It also gave him the chance to alter his behavior.

He was fortunate. Not everyone has that opportunity. As a result, we do not always recognize our behavior as impolite, unapologetic, difficult, or bullying.

Why are people rude? The fast pace of work and life is blamed for the deterioration of good manners. Many overworked people express their frustration by treating others rudely—or simply don't take the time to be polite.

In competitive workplaces, people may even believe that courteous acts make them look weak or obsequious. Research shows that most executives who others perceive to be rude consider themselves to be effective and their communication style to be direct and robust. Peter Thies of The River Group recently commented in *AgendaWeek* that, "Often executives are completely unaware of how their behavior is experienced by those around them."

It is often the case that these executives are task-focused; they achieve results. Moreover as Thies commented, "Strong producers are often promoted because (disruptive) behavior is often downplayed as a mere personality quirk." Like Clive Anderson they may perceive their rudeness as **inadvertently** saying or doing something that hurts someone else. The trouble is their team may consider the behavior as hostile—in other words, they are **intentionally** saying or doing something to hurt someone else. When this behavior becomes the norm then the executive is perceived to be intentionally aggressive and a bully.

So, it is clearly costly for the organization in engagement and employee focus. But it is also costly for the organization financially. It reduces productivity and produces much higher staff turnover

Earlier this year, Heather Cho, an EVP of Korean Air Lines, daughter of the chairman and granddaughter of its founder, was forced to resign after a public outcry involving her treatment of a flight attendant. The flight attendant claimed she was hit, shoved and threatened by Ms. Cho. According to the Supreme Court papers, Ms. Cho screamed obscenities at the flight attendant and ordered the plane to return to the gate at JFK airport New York.

Was Ms. Cho's behavior intentionally or inadvertently aggressive? There was certainly a huge imbalance of power between her and the flight attendant. The trial judge expected her to appear repentant and contrite for her bullying. But, in his summary comments he expressed doubt that Ms Cho's show of contrition was genuine and commented that it was a case where "human dignity" had been "trampled upon." As a result, to date, Heather Cho has served nearly five months of a prison sentence for obstructing aviation safety.

After a successful appeal her sentence has been reduced to ten months prison term plus a suspended sentence. Nevertheless, she still remains guilty of using violence against flight attendants.

This incident appears to have left Heather Cho's career in ruin, and an organization in crisis. On a personal level, she has not convincingly exhibited any behavioral accountability or sensitivity in keeping her own rudeness in check. On a corporate level, she has not demonstrated that she can assess her habits in terms of reputational risk to herself, her family and her organization.

To add insult to injury, because South Korean aviation law bars passengers from acts that could endanger a plane's safety (such as shouting, using threatening language or otherwise causing a disturbance), the Korean transport ministry has said it will place sanctions on Korean Air of a ban on some routes or fines of up to \$2m. The whole mess could have been avoided by dealing with situations without rudeness.

The total cost of promoting incivility in the workplace is Staff Turnover + Opportunity Cost of lost business + Absenteeism + Presenteeism and in the worst cases Legal Defence Cost + Dispute Resolution + Trial Costs + Settlements + Workers Compensation Costs + Disability Insurance Claims + Fraud Investigation.

rates. Research is clear; staff don't leave their company; they leave their boss.

Christine Porath, an associate professor at Georgetown University says, "Incivility at work has become rampant." Fifty percent of the North American workers she surveyed in 2011 said they were treated rudely at least once a week; which is up from 25% in 1998. Porath found that 80% of victims of incivility lost work time worrying about the incidents, 78% felt less committed to their employers, and nearly half decreased their work effort. "Studies also show that people even perform worse when they just witness incivility and aren't the target of it themselves," she said.

Similarly, a study of British workers found that 40% had experienced incivility or disrespect over a two-year period, with such behavior particularly common in the public sector. "This is a mainstream problem that happens in organizations that are generally well respected and think they're quite employee friendly," according to Ralph Fevre, professor of social research at Cardiff University.

While many managers would say that incivility is wrong, not all recognize that it has these tangible costs. Studies have shown that across a variety of indicators, organizational citizenship accounted for anywhere from 18 to 38 percent of the variance in performance outcomes. So, from the C-suite to the frontline, everyone in the organization needs to see civility as part of their citizenship of an organization.

Of course, it is C-suite who have the most impact on culture. Micheal O'Leary CEO of Ryanair, the world's busiest international airline, admitted a few years ago, "One of the weaknesses of the company now is it is a bit cheap and cheerful and overly nasty, and that is a reflection of my personality." He was forced to rethink that after two profit warnings were issued in 2013.

Shareholders also complained that the airline's image of rudeness was costing it. The CEO admitted it and accepted that things had to change. One year later there was a 32% rise in half-year profits and the change in fortunes was attributed to the radical overhaul of its image and services. O'Leary subsequently joked, "If I'd known it was going to generate this much free PR, I'd have done it years ago,"

Workplace cultures may differ a great deal internationally but the underlying principle of politeness is global. Negative work behaviors such as rudeness and disrespect affect most individuals' performance and cognition, regardless of culture. The point of being civil is to preserve harmony by showing good intentions and consideration for the feelings of others.

Manners reflect a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. This is a critical element of Emotional Intelligence. As Margaret Mead said, "I have a respect for manners—they are a way of dealing with people you don't agree with or like." Without manners or civility, rudeness and bullying can dominate the work culture and everyone pays the price.

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