



TenStep Supplemental Paper

9 March 2007

Civil Sense

It is time organizations did something about workplace rudeness

Key Learnings:

- While workplace rudeness is not a new phenomenon, incidents of incivility are on the rise
- This situation is alarming as frequent cases of workplace rudeness adversely affect employee productivity, morale and retention.

As workloads swell and people increasingly rely on telephones and e-mails to communicate, the need for politeness while communicating or interacting is no longer top priority. In fact, most executives, in a hurry to pack in too much into a business hour, find no time to be nice! However, lack of courtesy is becoming a serious workplace problem.

Today, more than 90 percent of employees experience some amount of incivility at work which affects their morale, productivity and willingness to stay put. In short, workplace rudeness has an adverse affect on employee productivity and retention.

In a recent survey by an independent research group, more than 50 percent of people surveyed report to have taken action on rudeness that includes asking for a transfer and even leaving the job. In addition to a loss of talent, workplace rudeness costs an organization time and effort.

Of nearly 3000 employees surveyed, nearly half say they have lost work time worrying about a colleague's or superior's impolite behavior. Workplace rudeness has also forced nearly 25 percent of them to cut back on their efforts at work.

Genesis

Workplace rudeness is not a new occurrence. However, it definitely is on the rise. "People have to respond in shorter time spans now and they often have greater workloads, which causes more stress," says an organizational psychologist.

Rudeness or incivility is a side effect of this stress. Moreover, with a decline in face-to-face conversations, most people believe that they can get away with a little impoliteness.

Psychologists also believe that workplace rudeness is a natural extension of the impoliteness that is increasingly occurring in an employees' everyday life. For instance, if on the way to work an employee meets a rude bus conductor or an impolite vendor, the chances that he would carry some of that rudeness to work are high.

A rise in both workplace and everyday-life rudeness is also a "part of a general shift to people mainly thinking about themselves," adds Lynne Truss, the author of "Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today".



TenStep Supplemental Paper

When people grow more self-centered, they pay little attention to cultivating good social relationships. The results are a lack of respect for people and a lack of understanding about acceptable social behaviors and manners.

Reasons for rise

Increase in workplace rudeness can also be attributed to an increase in the tolerance threshold. People expect others to be rude and are willing to accept some level of workplace rudeness! In a survey, researchers asked random groups of people about their perception of the workplace rudeness.

A majority of respondents endorsed the thinking that, "Since society is a lot ruder than what it used to be, what goes on at work will definitely reflect this increase in rudeness."

Another reason for a rise in rudeness is the increasing integration of diverse employees. With organizations going global, most work teams constitute employees from different cultures making ground for more chances of miscommunication. Moreover what is polite in one culture may be rude in another.

It would be difficult, even impossible, for any remote management headquarters to be well-versed in different cultural norms and values. Therefore, an organization's ability to recognize and correct unacceptable behaviors is severely impaired in a multinational setting.

Defining rudeness

Workplace rudeness comes in different forms ranging from managers who fail to acknowledge employee presence, to workers who ignore their colleagues, to employees who pass disparaging remarks, spread rumors, and laugh at others, to stressed executives who are perpetually shouting and make employees feel that they have to accept their rude behavior. An employee would, on a typical work day encounter at least one of these forms of rudeness.

The effects of workplace rudeness manifest themselves in:

- An increase in absenteeism
- Employees' unwillingness to put in any extra effort or work for longer than scheduled work hours
- Decrease in loyalty

However, even as rudeness adversely affects morale, productivity and retention, most cases go unnoticed or unreported. In fact, more than 50 percent of employees surveyed worry that reporting cases of rudeness might boomerang, painting them in poor light. What then can an organization do to prevent the rise of workplace rudeness?

Setting it right from top down

"The first step is educating people when you see it happen," says Steve Miranda, a chief human resource officer. Another first is to involve executives and managers in creating a



TenStep Supplemental Paper

civil workplace. "Too many leaders do not see that as part of their job and often do not realize they have a problem until it is too late," says an executive coach.

In addition to making 'prevention of rudeness' a priority, managers should keep their eyes open for incidents of rudeness and address perpetrators immediately and as gently as possible. Behavioral experts believe that asking a few open-ended questions helps identify the reason behind the behavior and thus suggest a better solution.

Activating the bottom-line

Besides getting managers to take on the responsibility of creating a 'polite' workplace, employees too need to be involved. The simplest approach to increasing employee involvement entails publishing literature to inform employees on acceptable workplace behaviors and manners.

As part of such literature, the management can include case studies and real-life examples to demonstrate the virtues of treating co-workers well, being team players and motivating subordinates.

Encouraging employees to report rudeness, even when they are not the victims, can help reduce such incidents. However, it is important that employees recognize the difference between quirky mood swings and habitual rude behavior.

Another effective 'prevention' approach is to conduct in-house workshops on anger management, team building, motivation, time management, negotiations and social conduct.

Workplace rudeness can disrupt an employee's work life. Surveys document an increase in turnover and a decrease in employee efficiency as a result. Unless organizations respond with proactive measures, workplace rudeness will eat into their productivity and profits.