INCIVILITY AND BULLYING - QUICK TIPS

Incivility and bullying are damaging to academic unit culture, collegiality, and productivity. If left unchecked, these behaviors can become the norm. Creating a culture of civility that minimizes these behaviors is the leaders' job. Such a culture doesn't occur by accident; positive professional interactions must be modeled, encouraged and rewarded. If cultivated and maintained, a positive culture supports creativity, better employee health, greater levels of cooperation, and higher retention of top performers.

Incivility and Bullying in Academic Units

- We begin with a brief description of incivility and bullying behaviors effectively summarized by Bob Sutton in his "dirty dozen":
  1. Insults
  2. Violation of personal space
  3. Unsolicited touching
  4. Threats
  5. Sarcasm
  6. Flames
  7. Humiliation
  8. Shaming
  9. Interruption
  10. Backbiting
  11. Glaring
  12. Snubbing

- Colleagues do not always get along. Complete consensus is not required; for the academic mission to be fulfilled, disagreements and antipathy must be professionally bounded. It is possible for an otherwise positive unit culture to be undermined or destroyed through negative, uncivil, or anti-social behaviors if these are not confined and limited.

- In a 2016 US survey, 64 percent of academic respondents said they have been the target of faculty incivility; 77 percent said they have witnessed someone else being targeted (Gluckman, 2017). Yet it is rarely reported—only an estimated 1-6% of employees who experience incivility ever file a complaint (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

- Examples of damaging incivility include:
  - Unrealistic expectations for responses and requests
  - Continued complaining
  - Making belittling or denigrating comments
  - Engaging in disrespectful meeting conduct: eye-rolling, negative side comments, etc.
  - Faculty dismissing or disrespecting staff, viewing them as lower class group members
  - Public shaming or blaming
  - Taking credit for work done by someone else
  - Ignoring the contributions of colleagues
  - Forming silent coalitions that do not surface disagreements and express them in a passive-aggressive manner

- Examples of bullying include:
  - Expressing rude or aggressive judgment of others
  - Pushing relentlessly for one's own views
  - Being intolerant of other perspectives or positions

- Another type of of bullying, victim bullying, superficially appears passive and considerate: the perpetrator expresses excessive concern about his or her fear and victimization, and the effect is to put others on the defensive and advance the priorities of the "victim" in a way that shields him or her from questioning.

When Incivility and Bullying go Unchecked, It is Costly

- Unchecked incivility escalates and spreads because it sets the norm for "how we do it here"—it provides evidence that incivility is what works if one wishes to succeed in the immediate environment.

- Endemic uncivil conduct diminishes cohesion, commitment, and communication. It can aggravate disagreements into the development of factions. It makes it harder to recruit and retain top performers, and spreads hostility and division.

- Rude, uncivil, and unprofessional behavior can be costly for organizations through reduced performance, productivity, and creativity, as well as increased distraction and negative emotions (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

- The effects of incivility on individuals accumulate and can raise stress levels, cause health problems, increase absenteeism, and lower achievement (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). It can lead even to acts of violence.

- The effects of incivility generally, and bullying specifically, are to distort communication and make it harder for certain people to express some or any views without fear. Even more seriously, whole views or positions can simply get excluded even from consideration. Incivility thus works against one of the main goals of an academic community: idea generation. Creating and maintaining a respectful research, teaching, and learning environment enhances collegial relationships and creates psychological safety, thus supporting increased creativity and productivity.

How it Spreads: The Contagion Effect

- Incivility and bullying flourish where:
    - the risks of exposure are low; and
    - the likelihood of being held accountable is low.

- If faculty and staff see these behaviors and see no intervention, the behaviors are likely to spread. This contagion is dangerous.
    - *An individual's emotions, perceptions, and behaviors can be "caught" by others in the group through social contagion.*
    - *Negative emotions and behaviors are more contagious, and can be more powerful, than positive behaviors.*
    - *Uncivil behavior can, over time, become the group norm even if initially only deployed by one or a few group members.*

- Be aware of your own behavior as a leader. Incivility from your unit members can spread to you, influencing how you behave. If you model incivility as a leader, it will increase the contagion effect within the unit, hastening the spread of these behaviors. Incivility from a leader is even more powerful and deleterious than incivility from peers (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

Establishing Community Norms: Leadership Action Plan

- A culture of civility doesn't occur by accident; positive academic and professional interactions must be modeled, encouraged and rewarded.

- Action—or lack of action—by authority figures and opinion leaders can unintentionally reward uncivil behavior, and thus encourage it.

- Good administrative hygiene matters: communicate expectations about how members of a unit should interact with each other, especially in disagreements, and reinforce those expectations.

- Leaders who model courteous, respectful professional conduct help set and enforce community norms. Members of the unit (and beyond) are watching.

- Listen and interact respectfully:
    - *Frequently and regularly check for understanding, for example by saying "Let me see if I understood correctly …".*
    - *Ask open-ended questions that begin with a request, such as "Tell me more about …".*
    - *Restate what was heard to ensure understanding, and demonstrate active listening.*

- Establish meeting protocols: Step in if conduct is over the line, and firmly and respectfully ask for inappropriate comments to be rephrased to be more constructive and actionable.

- Do not permit insults or belittling of others in meetings. Develop personal scripts to address these.

- Provide opportunities for quiet members to speak.

- Be vigilant: Many of your colleagues will not report incidents. Instead, it is more common (and the path of least resistance) to ignore or avoid unpleasantness. Many will seek to re-frame incidents of incivility as "no big deal" (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

Respond to All Reports Seriously

- Prevention is better than reaction. Sometimes, though, it is too late for anything other than responding. If you are too late to prevent, make sure you respond.

- Practice how to respond effectively, including preparing personal scripts for speaking up, for asking for comments to be reframed, or for when you hear concerns about uncivil or bullying behavior (NCPRE, 2017). For example:
    - *Your remarks about [colleague] are making me uncomfortable. Let's stick to facts in our staff meetings.*
    - *I understand you do not like [colleague]. Can you explain your complaint again without using sarcasm? It will help me understand it better.*
    - *I am sorry you had these negative experiences. We want a workplace where we all feel valued. I will think over my course of action and get back to you by [timeframe].*

- Cultivate open communication. All members of a unit should be aware of the appropriate channels for assistance in dealing with uncivil or bullying behavior.

- Speak to your faculty and staff about having disputes civilly and respectfully. Encourage them to take their issues to the person closest to the problem first, and offer assistance (impartial third parties, for example) to assist in facilitating difficult conversations if necessary.

- Apply consistent consequences for the same conduct. This is essential for establishing and maintaining healthy social norms in the unit.

References

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