

Incivility

Bonnie A. Osif

Precisely because rudeness is quite common, it is not a trivial issue. Indeed, in our day-to-day lives it is possibly responsible for more pain than any other mortal failing.

—Emrys Westacott¹

When we move out of ourselves and into the other person's experience, seeing the world with that person, as if we were that person, we are practicing empathy.

—Arthur Ciaramicoli and Katherine Ketcham²

In a few short days in September 2009, the public saw a tennis champion lose control on the court and verbally accost an official, a musician barge onto a stage and belittle an award winner by saying someone else deserved the award, and a congressman call the president a liar during an address to Congress. Anyone who watched the news saw these instances, while in each of our lives there were probably cases of cars running red lights, people pushing in the stores, doors slammed in faces, and comments that were non-productive and hurtful. Last night, a woman in a supermarket was overheard on her cell phone viciously screaming at a family member who had asked to visit. None of us knew the particulars of the situation, and frankly, I don't think any of us who couldn't get beyond her voice would want to even know a person who could be so cruel to someone and thoughtless enough to subject adults and children to this foul-mouthed harangue.

This is the environment of incivility that has made the news and office discussions. Many organizations have civility committees and sessions on civil behavior in the workplace. Whether this is a newish phenomena or is simply a long-standing problem that is getting more media attention because we now have more media options (picture some of

the rude outbursts captured on YouTube, for example), the fact remains that we are constantly being reminded of the lack of civility in many aspects of our lives. And as libraries come under increased financial pressures and questions about the real need for libraries in the light of "everything being on the Web" it is important that the library be a welcoming, useful place to students, to the general public, the decision makers, and those who spend their days and nights working in the library. This has become an issue that must be addressed, and the wealth of materials indicate that it has been recognized as an important topic.

Slow down and be present in your life

Workplace incivility is defined in the early study by Andersson and Pearson as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others."³ While there are other definitions, this a good definition to begin the study and one referenced in other works.

Civility: A Cultural History is a long, detailed, very well referenced treatise that provides a wealth of interesting information.⁴ While we might think of civility in light of our viewing of PBS British dramas contrasted with rude behavior on reality television and on our own roadways, the issue has a much richer and longer history. Davetian writes on "the tripartite nature of civility and the civilizing process: their historical foundations; their dependence on moral, education, and political values; and their very deep connection with human emotion."⁵ As he states, "The study of the historical background of a culture is vital to one's understanding of its civility practices as well as its ongoing present."⁶ History informs our present. This perspective provides a deep and different look at the subject. He defines courtesy and civility "as the extent to which citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others as well



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as the welfare of the culture they share in common.”⁷ On a larger scale he defines civility as the “degree to which states value each other’s welfare and the preservation of world order enough to take the necessary steps to avoid misunderstandings, humiliation, injustice and other acts that set in motion the need for acts of retribution.”⁸ He begins with an historical review from 1200 to the nineteenth century. He then details civility in France, England, and the United States using literature, records, and artifacts to illustrate the norms in these countries. Next, he looks at the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the changes in our sense of civility in the three countries. Section three is an analysis of the sociology of civility and the roles of emotion, shame, and embarrassment in the study. Next, he uses the previous chapters as a basis for a comparison of modern day France, England, and America concerning “civility styles and civil relations, state systems, family and childrearing, conceptions of self-esteem, education, media, conversation, courtship, work ethic, bureaucracy, and citizenship.”⁹ This section is fascinating, and if you don’t feel the need or interest in reading any other part of the book, take a look at Part IV. Although you won’t get the full picture without the historical and sociological underpinnings, the comparative study is a wonderful look at a detailed study, provides insight, may cause you to challenge some of your assumptions or biases, and may lead to some better understand of difficult cultures. While not essential for the functioning of the library, this is a book well worth a review for its interesting insight into an important subject from a commendable perspective.

In *A Short History of Rudeness* Caldwell writes, “Manners are what is left when serious issues of human relations are removed from consideration; yet without manners serious human relations are impossible.”¹⁰ The book’s goal is not to provide answers to etiquette questions but to “explore what makes manners so compelling a concern, yet at the same time so elusive. It will try to map out the difference between civility and rudeness by plumbing their hidden social, psychological, and even biological undercurrents.”¹¹ The book works in history and sociology as well as the new types of media. Edith Wharton, the Internet, Martha Stewart, movies, and television all get a mention in the book. With this wide range of subjects across a time line of more than one hundred years, rudeness is put into perspective.

A certain danger attends the very act of reading out a roll call of social transgressions and monstrosities of public loutishness. It is suspiciously easy to polemicize an instance of bad behavior into an emblem of the decay of the times and portent of apocalypse and the pleasure of denouncing the antisocial excesses of one’s age had been a conventional and rather stale reflex for, well, ages.¹²

Caldwell makes it clear that manners do change and evolve over time and in specific situations but that there is always a “need for order” and the creation of “a rough code of manners.”¹³ “With equal participation from everyone, manners never stabilize, but cycle incessantly, worsening or disintegrating in one context, re-forming themselves in another.”¹⁴ Well referenced, fascinating overview with a wealth of good examples to illustrate his points.

Editor Dietmar Schloss writes a brief history of civility and manners in America to begin *Civilizing America*. America was “built on the principle of freedom rather than submission, it raised the expectation that it would function without its citizens having to make a conscious effort at civilization.”¹⁵ However, some famous individuals voiced their dissent in their writings. These authors included James Fennimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James. They found “the anti-civilizing thrust of the democratic rhetoric” disturbing and criticized it from an aesthetic and moral perspective.¹⁶ The book is a collection of essays on manners in America through the perspective of authors and their letters and books. These include John Cotton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Brockden Brown, Benjamin Franklin, and more. While meant for those with a strong scholarly interest in civility and a good background in literature, the book is very interesting and provides a rather unique perspective.

Listen to the voice of empathy

In the preface of *Ethical Leadership*, Fluker writes,

A major assumption of this book is that leaders of the new century must not only be aware of environmental realities that shape the challenges and issues that they must confront. They must also be aware of the inner environments that affect character, civility, and a sense of community. Leaders who are not aware of the interiority of experience, the subconscious elements that often drive behavior and action, are increasingly in very vulnerable circumstances and can endanger the mission of a team, organization and, as we have witnessed too many times to ignore, very large numbers of people.¹⁷

Clear and strong, Fluker provides the information needed to help “develop a new generation of emerging leaders who are *awake*—physically and emotionally whole, spiritually disciplined, intellectually astute, and morally anchored.”¹⁸ At the core of his model are character, civility, and community. He defines civility as being

used in a variety of contexts, often masking complex historical, sociological, and methodological issues. In common usage, civility refers to a set of manners, certain etiquettes, and social graces that are rooted in specific class orientations and moral

sensibilities. Civility, however, does not refer simply to etiquette, manners, and social graces but is inclusive of social capital and the inherent benefits accrued by these networks of reciprocity. Civility also has to do with the individual's social dignity within that system. . . . Without a strong civil society, the experiment in democracy becomes an anesthetizing drama of conformity to the power of the state, procedural rules, and rights that masquerade as moral values.¹⁹

With a wealth of supporting research, references to current and historic figures, and clear, pointed writing, this book is worth reading cover to cover, not just the section on civility. Fluker calls for "leaders who are able to stand at the intersections of personal reality and possibility (character), social reality and possibility (civility), and spiritual reality and possibility (community) and consciously set goals and objects and implement life-affirming resolutions are we what we are terming ethical leaders."²⁰ A lofty goal, but a necessary one. Even if you don't share Fluker's religious perspective, the book is inspiring and persuasive. Put this on your must-read list.

The Civility Solution sets an Olympian goal for itself. The author, founder of the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins, writes in the preface,

This book aims to help you find exactly what rudeness is and how it works. Most important, you will learn how to defend yourself effectively and civilly from its daily challenges. Being civil is the sterling strategy for rudeness prevention. If you are respectful and considerate, most of the people with whom you come in contact will be motivated to be the same in return. When rudeness can't be prevented, civility is still your best choice.²¹

While this belief that civility is contagious may be a little too optimistic, it is a nice idea to cling to. Different types of rudeness are described with clear and realistic examples. Unfocused rudeness is lack of consideration or disregard evidenced by those who push onto elevators, let doors swing shut on others, and other thoughtless behaviors. Focused rudeness is interrupting, gossip, and trying to make others look bad or yourself look good at the expense of others. Rudeness can be stressful, hurt self-esteem, poison the workplace, and can lead to violence.²² It can have an impact on work both in quality and in missed days. Reasons for rudeness are listed as individualism, lack of restraint, both low and high self-esteem, unequal treatment, stress, feelings of anonymity, anger, fear, and mental and emotional health issues.

Eight rules for a civil life are presented and serve as headers for this column. Each of these is developed with an illustrative example, and the chapter concludes with eight personality types (neurotic, extrovert, introvert, closed or

open, agreeable or disagreeable, conscientious, low conscientious, risk takers, and risk averse) and how to deal with them. Responses to rudeness are detailed. One technique is the 3+3 sequence. This involves cooling off and calming down, not taking it personally, deciding what to do, stating the facts, informing others about how you felt, and requesting that it not be repeated. He summarizes this as the SIR Sequence (State the facts, Inform the rude person of the impact it had on you, and Request it not be repeated).²³

The rest of the book is a collection of short descriptions of specific problems and solutions. Some are in personal life and some are in the work arena. These can be scanned for pertinent situations. His two pages of closing thoughts are worth reviewing. He lists very practical tips on dealing with rudeness from the psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli that are definitely worth reading. He concludes the book with "Apologies and forgiveness are the lifesavers of relationships. They are two splendid examples of smart ways of treating others well. Use them unsparingly as you go through the wonderful and difficult experience in relating and connecting that we call life."²⁴ A very enjoyable and practical book.

Keep a positive attitude

Pulling absolutely no punches, Sutton begins *The No Asshole Rule* with

You might call such people bullies, creeps, jerks, weasels, tormentors, tyrants, serial slammers, despots, or unconstrained egomaniacs, but for me at least asshole best captures the fear and loathing that I have for these nasty people. I wrote this book because most of us, unfortunately, have to deal with assholes in our workplaces at one time or another. The book shows how these destructive characters damage their fellow human beings and undermine organizational performance.²⁵

The rest of this very easy to read book develops this premise. Chapters cover why all workplaces need this rule, how to implement it, and how to keep it in operation. Chapters relate "How to Stop Your 'Inner Jerk' from Getting Out" and "Tips for Surviving Nasty People and Workplaces." He concludes with his reason for writing the book—"I wrote it because my life and the lives of the people I care about are too short and too precious to spend our days surrounded by jerks."²⁶ We shouldn't accept this behavior, and he gives us a means to address this with humor and clarity.

"Dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others. . . . In the workplace, dignity is realized through countless small acts of resistance against abuse and an equally strong drive to take pride in one's daily work."²⁷ Hodson's *Dignity at Work* notes that dignity "is necessary for a fully realized life."²⁸ Because we spend so much time at work and work is such an integral part of our lives, dignity at

work is very important. The book reviews four strategies: resistance, citizenship, independence, and social relationships. Four challenges are mismanagement and abuse, overwork, limits on autonomy, and employee involvement. Each is developed in later chapters. This is a very detailed, academic work with a wealth of references. While in some ways tangential to a review on civility, dignity is a part of the story and his discussion is an important look at the interplay of dignity from both the worker and management. The book is recommended for those with a deep interest in workplace sociology.

Respect others and grant them plenty of validation

While written more for counselors, Stebnicki's *Empathy Fatigue* provides very useful advice for those who are in

chosen careers in person-centered environments with an aura of compassion and a good heart. Basically, they are skilled helpers who are empathetic and are required to facilitate attachments with others. As a consequence, empathy fatigue appears to be a natural artifact of working in 'high touch' or person-centered environments.²⁹

Stebnicki asks "So how do we come out of the darkness and into the light to facilitate emotional, social, physical, psychological, spiritual, and occupational healing strategies that can heal our soul wound experience?"³⁰ The book describes empathy fatigue (counselor exhaustion caused by the effect of the client's story or issues), details self-care strategies to heal the fatigue, and provides guidelines to "identify the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion that occurs early on in the chosen career."³¹ The book is not directly applicable because the emphasis is on the various types of counselors (medical, nursing, psychological, religious, what he calls high-touch professions), but the book is of some interest as many librarians work very closely with some groups of faculty, staff, or students and can take on some aspects of the counselor role.³² As a guide for individuals working through tenure or pursuing a degree, much more than research strategies can be shared, and some of the aspects of counselor and empathy fatigue can occur. While not essential reading, the book is very interesting and may provide some self-help for those very engaged with their patrons' needs and problems.

Congress Behaving Badly begins with a definition about civility by former congressman Lee Hamilton: "Simply put, it means that legislators respect the rights and dignity others. It does not mean that they need to agree with one another—far from it. Rather, treating one another civilly is how people who don't agree still manage to weigh issues carefully and find common ground."³³

The book continues:

At a simple level, to be civil is to be nice. But civility has greater claims than simply being nice.

Civility is about having a high regard for human beings, and especially for people that one regularly deals with. Civility is about listening to others, and especially those who have different ideas and perspectives. And civility is about trusting one's colleagues. . . civility recognizes and understands disagreements but not disagreeableness.³⁴

After the basics on civility, the rest of the book is a serious look at the functioning or lack of functioning of the U.S. Congress and is of most direct import to those with a strong interest in the subject. However, if there is a library with a contentious environment there might be some strong parallels with the situations detailed in this book and the insight might be useful. Or, if the reader is interested in the functioning in Congress, then this very readable and timely book is recommended.

Disagree graciously and refrain from arguing

While a preliminary study done in a Singapore workplace, Lim and Teo's study of cyber incivility is interesting, important, and will probably encourage additional studies. It is defined as "communicative behavior exhibited in computer-mediated interactions that violate workplace norms of mutual respect."³⁵ It is very easy to be impolite in an e-mail in the best of circumstances. Things come across differently electronically so this can be a problem when done accidentally. Deliberate flaming, rudeness, or bullying can be detrimental to the individual and the work environment. The study was done in the financial industry. One hundred and ninety-two employees responded to a survey on e-mails from supervisors. Ninety-one percent of the respondents experienced cyber incivility from supervisors and indicated it had a negative impact on their attitudes at work.³⁶ A regression analyses showed that there is a significant and negative correlation of cyber incivility with organizational commitment and job satisfaction. There was also a significant and positive association with workplace deviance (behaviors that harm a workplace) and intentions to leave a job. Interestingly, there is a difference between the types of incivility by gender. "Male supervisors tend to display active and direct forms (being condescending, demeaning, saying something hurtful) while female supervisors were more likely to engage in passive forms (using e-mails for time-sensitive messages, not acknowledging receipt of e-mails, not replying to e-mails)."³⁷ This was a small, focused study that needs additional research, but the implications are interesting. Very worthwhile reading; it might be useful to monitor the research for citations to this study.

Cortina, Magley, Williams and Langhout surveyed over 1,100 public service workers to determine the amount of workplace incivility (71 percent) and noted that there are work-related and psychological distress, findings that were consistent with earlier findings "that ordinary daily hassles considerably outstrip major life stressors in predicting

damaged morale, impaired social and work functioning, and psychosomatic symptoms.”³⁸ Continuing their work in incivility and the workplace, Lim, Cortina, and Magley looked at incivility at both personal and group levels with findings that support other studies on the importance of addressing the issue.³⁹ They conclude “management should model appropriate, respectful workplace behavior and clearly state expectations of civility in mission statements, policy manuals, and new employee orientations. . . . When incivility does arise, instigators should be swiftly, justly, and consistently sanctioned.”⁴⁰ Cortina and Magley later surveyed three professions (university workers, attorneys, and court staff) about the existence of and their response to incivility. All groups reported uncivil behavior in the past year (75 percent in the university, 54 percent of the attorneys, and 71 percent of court staff).⁴¹ There were a variety of coping strategies (detachment, conflict avoidance, social support), but one commonality was the low rate of formal complaints (between 1 and 6 percent). They noted “these findings suggest that incivility must be appraised as fairly aversive and continue for some time—and perhaps even escalate to bullying—before employees report it to management.”⁴² Because incivility can lead to workplace dissatisfaction, poor performance, illness (both physical and emotional), and poor worker retention, it is a serious problem, but one that might not be known as reporting is low. Interesting study; newer work should be monitored.

Get to know the people around you

Martin and Hine detail the development and testing of a survey that could be used in studying workplace incivility.⁴³ They note that the survey used by Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout discussed above is useful for a general measure of workplace incivility, while their tool is geared for a multidimensional survey with a more comprehensive study. If you are considering a study of incivility, it would be worthwhile to review both articles and those that cite them and to determine which is the most appropriate for your institution.

Milam, Spitzmueller, and Penney performed an interesting study involving the survey of workers in a variety of fields to determine the personality traits of agreeableness (forgiving, good-natured, cooperative, trusting, warm, sympathetic, and generous), neuroticism (nervous, worrying, and insecure) and extraversion (sociable, talkative, assertive, ambitious, active, in search of excitement, and energy directed at others).⁴⁴ The findings were interesting. As they write, “individuals low in agreeableness experience more incivility than those who are high in agreeableness.”⁴⁵ Those high in neuroticism perceived more incivility, possibly since those who are “characterized by worrying, nervousness, insecurity, and self-pity” are more likely to see “events that may seem innocuous to others” as uncivil.⁴⁶ The authors make clear that this is a preliminary study and they do not make a causal link between the traits and

incivility. Much more research is needed. However,

from a practical perspective, managers should pay attention not only to how various personality traits affect job performance, but also to how personality traits can influence where or not someone receives or perceives incivility directed toward him or her. . . . instructors could highlight behaviors that are consistent with high agreeableness as possible conflict resolution strategies, similarly, instructors may want to illuminate and discourage behaviors that are consistent with low agreeableness or high neuroticism, as these behaviors may attract or invite incivility.⁴⁷

While preliminary, this is an intriguing study, and it might be worthwhile to look for updates of this study as it has some possible practical implications.

Pay attention to the small things

The very popular book *Talk to the Hand* states, “This book has quite a modest double aim: first to mourn, without much mature perspective or academic rigour, the apparent collapse of civility in all areas of our dealings with strangers; then to locate a tiny flame of hope in the rubble and fan it madly with a big hat.”⁴⁸ Truss states her purpose in writing the book was to “define and analyse six areas in which our dealings with strangers seem to be getting more unpleasant and inhuman day by day.”⁴⁹ The first area is “Was that so hard to say?” It concerns the demise of politeness. She writes that when someone is not polite you feel exasperated, indignant, dismayed by the rejection, frightened, and affronted. “Politeness is a signal of readiness to meet someone half-way; the question of whether politeness makes society cohere, or keeps other people safely at arms’ length, is actually a false opposition. Politeness does both, and that is why it’s so frightening to contemplate losing it.”⁵⁰ Second is “Why am I the One Doing This?” which concerns the movement from the mode when service actually meant the company performed a service for you rather than leaving you to work everything out for yourself via webpages or multiple layers of options on a phone. Next is “My Bubble, My Rules,” which deals with the idea that “our own personal space always seems to be up for grabs in unacceptable ways” from sound or people.⁵¹ “The Universal Eff-Off Reflex” concerns our modern communication styles. “Booing the Judges” covers the changes in deference and respect. Finally, “Someone Else Will Clean It Up” concerns the prevalence of non-accountability and the need for people to take responsibility, to try to be kinder, and to see what might happen. Fast, easy reading; it is clear why this has been a bestseller. Maybe it isn’t a profound, scholarly treatise, but practical common sense on facts of life that affect most of us and has real implication for the public service librarian.

As StevenB writes on the ACRLLog, “Increasing levels

of incivility are stealing from us our dignity, humanity and empathy.”⁵² At a gathering of Philadelphia area library workers, it became clear that they had a shared problem. They invited Dr. Frank Farley, chair of Temple’s Psychology Department to come to discuss incivility. He shared some interesting insights. In sum, he said we are in a period of the rise of the extreme (no one thinks of themselves as average), self-revelation, and compliance. With the Internet we now have the opportunity to do this on a “worldwide platform.” All of these have combined “with people so self-absorbed we have what Farley calls the “dis-inhibition process,” in which controls of the past that inhibited bad behavior are so far expanded that almost anything goes. Farley referred to this list of social ills as “the crime.” He recommended an article by Schroeder and Robertson that reviews some articles on the decline of classroom civility and recommends several actions.⁵³ While one of Schroeder and Robertson’s strategies (allowing students to develop their version of a civility plan) would be difficult in the dynamic flow of library populations, their overall strategy is useful. They suggest that one should be proactive (enforce the expectations), be specific (define the expectations), be a model, ask why a behavior is done (modify conditions if necessary), have a plan of action for certain behaviors, follow through and document incidents. The blog concludes that

perhaps for our own well being and sanity we should work to communicate to our students that we accept that they have different standards of civility, but that we expect and hope they will take some personal responsibility and accountability for demonstrating more empathy and caring for their fellow students in the library. They can be more self-policing, showing the ability to tolerate each other’s behavior, and we can support their efforts to co-exist in a shifting landscape of ambiguous rules and new experiences.

Very wise words. Take a look at the blog, the comments that follow, and Farley’s recommended article. All are well worth your time.

Ask, don’t tell

One thing is clear from the research on incivility—there is not a set of manners that you can memorize that will get you through every situation. Civility involves much more than which fork to use with what food. As Flucker said, it has complex issues. However, it is a daily fact of life, not just in the stores or in Congress but in our classrooms and libraries. It is one we may be dealing with on a daily basis, and strategies, policies, and coping methods are necessary. In the next column we will review another aspect of incivility—bullying in the workplace. Until then, I ask you to please have a pleasant day, and I look forward to your return to the next column.

Author’s Note: Bold headings are taken from The Civility Solution by P. M. Forni (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008).

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