Workplace incivility: An unavoidable product of human nature and organizational nurturing

In the uncivil workplace, "Us and them" or "we and they" are distinctions that divide and alienate. In the civil workplace, there are no such elites nor is there a perception that some, executives, for example, have special privileges. Rather, there are programs and policies that promote inclusion and that offer everyone an equal opportunity for personal and professional growth. In the end, civility reigns.

By Harvey A. Hornstein

Harvey A. Hornstein is Professor Emeritus, Columbia University, and a former professor in Columbia's Department of Social and Organizational Psychology. He is the author of nine books, most recently, The Haves and the Have Nots, The Abuse of Power and Privilege in the Workplace and How To Control It (Financial Times-Prentice Hall, 2002).

Richard, a junior manager in a large organization, was recounting his supervisor's behaviour, speaking in a monotone, the way that people sometimes do when they are trying to control sour feelings accompanying unpleasant memories.

"His targets were usually those of us who were most competent, which is what made the whole thing so weird. I mean if you're really concerned about performance, you don't pick on those who are performing best ....If you did well it could always have been better .... He'd get you for ... small infractions, slight oscillations from the standard. One of my peers turned in a report that we all had a hand in developing. There was a form that reports were supposed to have which other groups regularly modified as the need arose .... She had done a nice job integrating some difficult material, and there was plenty of time to revise .... But the boss went into one of his things. You never knew when it was coming. He said something like, 'There are ways of organizing reports which you do not have the knowledge or skill to judge or change.' He was really talking down to her in our presence.

(Fuller accounts of this story and the one below originally appeared in H.A. Hornstein, Brutal Bosses and Their Prey, Riverhead Books, New York, 1996).

Painting a vivid picture, Billy told me this memorable story about his boss's incivility.

"Almost anything could set him off. That's what made it so awful. You never could predict just when it was going to happen .... Don't imagine that I'm speaking to you about some wild-haired screamer. This fellow was a typical mid-forties, blue-suit type, balding, with a slight belly .... 'Billy,' he said, standing in the doorway so that everyone in the central area could see and hear us clearly. 'Billy, this is just not adequate, really not at all. We want to do better than this.' He was speaking ... as if I were a three-year-old. As he spoke he crumpled the papers that he held. My work. One by one ... holding them out ... and dropping them just inside my office as everyone watched. Then he said loudly, 'Garbage in, garbage out .... You gave me garbage. Now you clean it up.' I did. Through the doorway I could see people looking away because they were embarrassed for me. They didn't want to see what was in front of them: A thirty-six-year-old man in a three-piece suit stooping before his boss to pick up crumpled pieces of paper."

Employees' experiences of workplace incivility like these two may not be an everyday event; but neither are they uncommon. Evidence from a worldwide study involving more than 1,000 working people who described...
their bosses' behavior, without any labeling or evaluation, shows that on any given day one out of five reported to a boss who was guilty of these misbehaviors; 90 percent had this painful experience sometime during their careers. (Hornstein, *The Haves and The Have Nots*). Cynical readers, those who would claim that whining employees are prone to exaggerate mistreatment, are invited to halve these data, and then halve them again, because the numbers remain alarming: Even after such reductions we can infer that in the United States alone, each and every day, approximately three-quarters of a million workers are being bludgeoned by their boss's incivility.

The 1000 employees described bosses who crushed conventional rules of conduct with behavior that was harshly rude and impolite. And they told stories about other bosses who demanded unquestioning obedience, threatening punishment if it did not occur. These employees had bosses who accused them of misdeeds, prohibiting any discussion, while forcing them to "stand" silently, like children, and listen. Their bosses took credit for their subordinates' products, criticized subordinates personally, by picking on non-work related characteristics, and humiliated them in private and public, using demeaning names and insulting gestures. Incredibly, the common theme in employees' descriptions was that their bosses' incivility occurred even though it provided the bosses with no tangible gain whatsoever.

Four questions need to be answered if workplace incivility is to be eliminated:

1. Do bosses know better?
2. What is the organizational fallout of their uncivil behavior?
3. Why does it happen? (A particularly important and interesting question if bosses' misbehavior is clearly non-rational because it produces no tangible, personal benefit, they know better, and the organizational fallout is negative.)
4. What are the remedies?

This article will address these questions and offer some hopeful answers.

1. **Do bosses know better?**

   Yes! The evidence comes from a group of 48 working men and women who made the following five statements:

   1. During any and all encounters with subordinates, bosses should make every effort to exhibit an impersonal, professional "It's all business" demeanor.
   2. In order to be able to praise desired work behaviors and punish less desire ones, bosses should erect means for monitoring as much subordinate behavior as is practically possible.
   3. Bosses should have access to rules for establishing their compensation that may not be available to their subordinates.
   4. Bosses should keep *de facto* control over their decision-making while leading subordinates to believe that their ideas and influence are welcomed.
   5. Bosses' guideline for reckoning subordinates' worth and future is "What have you done for us today?" Making that guideline clear will encourage subordinates to continue, "Towing the mark."

   Each of these 48 individuals had direct reports as well as a superior to whom he or she reported, making each, simultaneously, both a boss and a subordinate. Selecting randomly, I addressed half of these people as a boss, saying, "You're a boss, so which of these five statements are useful guidelines for bosses?" The remaining half I addressed as subordinates, saying to each, "You're a subordinate. Which of the following are like a guideline that is used by your present boss?"

The modal response (actually more than fifty percent) for those who were addressed as "boss" was zero. As *bosses*, they were telling me that none of these five statements are useful guidelines for bosses. (Almost all of the rest identified only one of these statements as a useful guideline for bosses, with statement numbers one and three being the most frequent choices.) But, when these people were addressed as "subordinates", asking them whether their present bosses actually used these guidelines, the modal response was three. Whether their bosses truly used these guidelines, as these people were claiming, does not really matter. The discrepancy between respondents using a *boss-lens*, because I asked them to,
and those using a *subordinate-lens*, supports the conclusion that, "Yes, people who become bosses know better." And they should know better because bosses' incivility can be a threat to organizational success.

2. The organizational fallout of uncivil boss behavior

Hundreds of working men and women have told me about times when employees must decide between either expending extra effort on their company's behalf, when they could avoid doing so with complete impunity, or simply turning around and walking away. Their responses not only join other evidence showing the organizationally disastrous effects of bosses' incivility, they also purge naivété. No one should believe that civil boss behavior combined with incorrect business decisions prevents organizational failure. The story of organizational success is not just about bosses' incivility. A strong economy, well-protected market niches, unique competencies, and technological innovation can all produce profits despite bosses' misbehavior. But excellence is not forever. The corrosive effects of incivility create vulnerabilities that competitors may exploit.

When an employee's choice between working and walking hangs in the balance, the evidence shows that the decision is determined by feelings of loyalty, commitment, dedication, and attachment. Employees who identify with their employing organizations tend to expend extra effort to help, while those who feel alienated, turn and walk away.

Bosses' behavior is the pivotal determinant of the direction that will be taken. Their incivility increases employees' alienation and, as alienation increases, showing up for work is not accompanied by any sense of belonging. Motivation to advance the organization's goals weakens, diminishing employee's productivity, initiative, innovation, and willingness to perform the work of a good organizational citizen that—while not easily monitored—contributes to every company's success. Eventually, even society suffers as a steadily growing cadre of alienated working people learns to regard business organizations as the enemy, controlled by self-serving, uncivil bosses, who have little interest in the well being of employees or the communities in which they live.

3. The roots of incivility. Why it happens?

Why is this organizationally valuable sense of unity so frequently broken by bosses, the very people who, by objective, rational analysis, should be most committed to its maintenance?

The answer is that it ratifies their status in The Boss Club. Few psychological forces in organizational life have an impact that compares to those caused by the human inclination to become part of an elite *us*, and to elevate that group's status (as well as one's own) by diminishing *them*. Power, bestowed on bosses by their employing organizations, appears to be too great a temptation. It seduces bosses into using incivility as a means of venting their natural human impulse to engage in *me* and *we*-boosting.

The results of a worldwide program of research illustrate the point. Participants were asked this question: What do you think people do when they are assigned to a group and are then given the opportunity to secretly decide how some desired asset will be distributed between two other people, one a fellow group member, one of *us*, and the other one of *them*? Respondents prefer to believe that if they were in the situation, they would disregard the group labels (which, variously, have been based on real distinctions, bogus ones, and ones that are obviously random), and choose to divide the assets equally.

But evidence from nearly three decades of research with people of all ages, who grew up in different cultures and were given varying kinds of assets to distribute to either one of *us* or one of *them*, proves that the self-serving belief in equal distribution is wrong. People in this situation do what people working in organizations also do when they are separated from others across barriers of *them*. The assets are not divided equally. Resorting to *me* and *we*-boosting, they elevate *us* by diminishing *them*.

Remarkably, human beings are so inclined to maximize differences between themselves and others that people faced with this choice typically prefer options for dividing the assets which widen the difference between *us* and *them* to other, seemingly more rational, options that result in differences that are smaller, but provide greater, overall profits for their own group members! Evidence from city streets, research laboratories, and organizations teaches the same lesson: Looking at someone across group
membership barriers releases powerful human impulses to boost us by diminishing them.

The consequences for organizations are tragic. Every time that bosses grant themselves special rewards, show that they are free to do unto subordinates what subordinates are not free to do unto them, and stifle employees' voices by autocratically exercising their power, they send the workforce messages that erode affiliation and increase alienation. Although these me and we-boosting boss behaviours harm organizations, they continue because they permit rewarding changes in the image that bosses have about their own status.

Organizations lose, but the bosses who cause these losses are not deterred. They might not like the losses, but they appear to love the status gains produced by me and we-boosting. Something must be done.

3. What are the remedies?

The good news is that something can be done. The bad news is that it is impossible to entirely eliminate incivility or its deleterious consequences. Constraint is the most that can be hoped for. The research evidence cited in this essay reveals why this short-of-perfect solution must be: If human beings' natural inclination to behave in ways that boost the status of me and we at the expense of they is more likely to be expressed when people have superior power, and if bosses' me and we-boosting generates alienation in the workforce, workplace incivility and its organizational consequences cannot be eradicated.

But organizations have a choice: They can nurture bosses' me and we-boosting and its accompanying incivility by maintaining policies and procedures that encourage we/they distinctions. Or, they can reduce these distinctions and the consequences they perpetuate by implementing policies and procedures that send genuine messages of inclusion, saying that the organization regards all of its employees, bosses and their subordinates, as part of we. Inclusive messages invite employees to identify with the organization while inhibiting bosses from treating them as they.

Organizations nurture me and we-boosting by heightening we/they distinctions through the mismanagement of the three R's of organizational life:

1. We/they distinctions are heightened when organizations erect reward systems giving bosses compensation according to rules that are unavailable to any other employees (or, in many instances, even stockholders). Consider option grants, for example. Commonly, an option grant's availability is restricted to an exclusive senior management group, with almost one-third of all options going to organizations' top five executives. Moreover, for this small group, during the past several years, option grants have become an increasingly large part of total compensation. In the United States, between 1992 and 1997, for example, a period during which senior executive compensation is estimated to have doubled, more than one-half the increase came from option grants. (S. Tully, Fortune, June 8, 1998, "Raising the Bar," Pp. 272-78.) In some years, option grants have been as much as five times greater than a CEO's salary. (The Wall Street Journal, Work Week, January 18, 2000.) By 1999, the average grants given to CEOs and senior management were valued at $3.2 million and $681,000, respectively. In 2000, a study showed that "the value of options granted at the 325 largest companies in the United States equaled almost 20 percent of their pretax profits," leading to the conclusion that a lot of money that might have gone to shareholders went to executives. (The New York Times, B-1, G. Morgenson, March 24, 2002.) If some want to argue that executives deserve the compensation because of their contribution to earnings, then what happened in 2001 should trouble them. In that year, despite declining revenue and profit, the flow of options to executives continued unabated. The renowned investor, Warren Buffett, strongly criticized this means of lavish salary supplementation, saying, "There is no question in my mind that mediocre CEOs are getting incredibly overpaid. And the way it's being done is through stock options."

2. Organizational practices also strengthen we/they distinctions when they deliberately or
inadvertently discourage bosses' respectful treatment of subordinates. This occurs, for example, when existing policies and procedures engender:


b) a lack of concern for employees as people - by fostering a cultural code of conduct that prizes unemotional leaders who display stolid, "professional indifference" in response to genuine employee needs and obligations that arise from their roles in families and other non-organizational groups. (Research in organizational behaviour, 1996, 18, Pp. 111-156, J. Greenberg and K. S. Scott, "Why do workers bite the hand that feeds them.")

c) a lack of concern for employees as workers - by using dismissal as a first resort and announcing it with messages devoid of any empathic expression about the emotional distress that it is causing. (J. Greenberg, The Quest for Justice on the Job; Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks, California, 1996)

Finally, we/they distinctions grow wider when organizations discourage recognition of employees' abilities by permitting and promoting leadership that disregards employees' views on matters where the employees have relevant experience and knowledge.

On the other hand, organizations that choose to reduce we/they distinctions with policies and procedures that promote inclusion manage the three R's of organizational life differently.

(1) **Rewards** - Rules of compensation are applied consistently across organizational groups. The approach to compensation used at Fleetwood Enterprises, located in Riverside, California, is an illustration: To link pay to performance, Fleetwood's compensation scheme builds employees' attachment to one another and to the organization by using explicit compensation formulas tailored to fit an employee's position. Throughout the organization, from top to bottom, base salaries are comparatively low, but incentive opportunities for supplementing that base are high: Senior managers, for example, receive stock options annually and incentive bonuses twice yearly, if Fleetwood's return on invested capital equals or exceeds its cost of capital. Plant managers' stock options and bonuses, on the other hand, depend on their plants' profits, while production workers' bonuses depend on their plants' productivity. Other Fleetwood Enterprise rewards mesh well with this pay scheme, sending a clear message of inclusion to employees. Walk through this perk-less company and you will find no executive dining rooms or special parking spaces. Fleetwood's chairperson flies coach to business meetings, and observers describe the company's senior executive offices as "ordinary." Arranging rewards in this way has profound affects on Fleetwood workers' sense of identity with the organization. As one of them said, "Senior management doesn't appear separate from the organization, but is a part of it," adding, "It builds trust...if the company does well, we all share in the rewards."

(2) **Respect** - Ordinary organizational policies and procedures affirm all employees both as workers who have a vocational afterlife and as people with legitimate needs and obligations arising from their membership in non-organizational groups. Ted Castle's experience as CEO of Rhino Foods, a Vermont dessert manufacturer, illustrates the point. Several years ago, Rhino Foods' production capacity was exceeding consumer demand. Instead of dismissing one-third of the firm's employees, Castle involved them in a search for ways of using excess staff effectively. Eventually, some of Rhino's employees were temporarily placed with one of the company's biggest customers. Working for that customer provided employees with skills that were useful to Rhino Foods. But
the process Rhino Foods used in order to achieve that gain is equally important. CEO Castle said, "Asking my employees for solutions not only solved a difficult problem, but engendered loyalty and built trust among the staff."

Maintaining an alternative to the two extremes of dismissal and guaranteed employment requires affirming employees as workers who have vocational concerns that go beyond their immediate employment. One way to communicate that affirmation is to commit an organization to efforts that result in employees' enhanced employability.

One example of such an effort was an AT&T project called Resource Link. In this case, an "internal contingent workforce" staffed by displaced managers and professionals, was assigned temporarily to projects across the company. Reports indicate that the effort provided AT&T with greater staffing flexibility, and employees with both stability and development opportunities.

A variation on this internal workforce theme, a redeployment procedure used by Intel, is another example of an effort at enhancing employability. This procedure once helped the firm avert mass layoffs by successfully relocating between 80 percent and 90 percent of Intel employees who needed to find new jobs because their old ones disappeared. Intel employee development centers supported redeployment by providing workers with opportunities for assessment, guidance, training, and Intel job listings. If all these opportunities failed to produce an internal placement, then outplacement assistance was also available.

Other companies enhance employees' life skills by providing them with college support, funded apprenticeships, and vouchers to use for retraining. Trustmark Insurance, for example, a Lake Forest, Illinois company, recruited employees who volunteered to be trained as computer programmers. Trustmark then not only paid for the employees' college-level classes, but also provided them with mentors to help with material being presented in the classes. BGS Systems Inc., in Waltham, Massachusetts, and Hewlett-Packard, also have provided courses for software engineers who want to upgrade their skills. In 1997, several companies (AT&T, Dupont, GTE, Johnson & Johnson, Lucent, TRW Unisys, and UPS) joined Talent Alliance, a system on the Web that provides employees with opportunities for vocational assessment, information regarding training at company expense, and job postings in the member companies. Through their involvement in Talent Alliance, these companies were sending a message: We accept our responsibility to work with employees in order to help them enhance their employability.

By accepting responsibility for enhancing employees' future employability, these alternatives to cost-cutting remedies send anti-me and we-boosting messages to bosses and subordinates. These messages say that although tough decisions might have to be made, me and we-boosting is out. Employees, who are part of we, are not commodities to be used and then abused, depending on our immediate needs.

Another option, work-family programs, also produces a profit and inhibits incivility. A poll of 300 companies reported by the Chicago-based Canon Consulting Group showed that 72 percent of the firms surveyed believed that absenteeism would be reduced if companies provided onsite or off-site support for children's day-care services. Instead of providing full-time day-care services, Hewitt Associates reports that about 15 percent of companies provide employees with access to backup care in the event their regular arrangements are disrupted by emergencies such as their children's or babysitter's illness.

Work-family programs that help employees meet their outside obligations advance organizational progress toward two desired outcomes: First, by lifting practical burdens from employees' shoulders they remove workplace distractions by easing their minds. Second, these programs help organizations progress toward the goal of inhibiting bosses' me and we-boosting and
the incivility they cause by announcing to the entire workforce that their company's concern with employees is not defined by the yardstick "What have you done for us today?"

(3) **Recognition** - Organizational policies and procedures that diminish we/they distinctions affirm employees as contributors. New tools for organization problem solving such as whole system intervention and University of Michigan Business School Professor Noel Tichy's teachable point of view are excellent illustrations of this powerful technology. In 1993, for example, Ford brought 2,400 employees together to plan the opening of a Mustang plant. And, when Boeing worked on developing the 777, meetings conducted under CEO Phil Condit's guidance included as many as 5,000 people. Using some extraordinary logistical expertise that solicits and uses individual input despite group size, these procedures increase the opportunity for having the right inputs at the right place at the right time. They also make the transfer of agreed-upon actions back into the workplace easier because personnel who will be involved in making the transition were involved in preparing what needs to be transferred. But, more than anything else, whole system intervention problem-solving procedures build organization-wide bonds of we by affirming the value of employees as contributors.

The application of Tichy's concept of the teachable point of view to organizations requires bosses to become teachers of their subordinates who, in turn, teach their subordinates. In Tichy's words, a teachable point of view is about what a person knows and believes about what it takes to succeed in his or her business as well as in business generally. (Noel Tichy, *The Leadership Engine*, Harper Business books, 1997.)

Beginning at the top of the organization, bosses meet with their subordinates in order to describe their teachable point of view. These meetings cascade down the organization until all boss/teachers have shared, debated, and reformulated their own views with their subordinates. Surely there are immediate tangible benefits to making all employees' teachable points of view explicit. The process strengthens organizational competence by increasing intra-individual consistency, meshing inter-individual expectations, and enhancing coordination within and between work units. But this process also affirms employees as contributors. When properly managed face-to-face discussion produces exposure and vulnerability for all participants regardless of rank it erodes we/they distinctions by broadening in-group boundaries.

Claims about paternalism are an often-used reason for maintaining policies and procedures hospitable to bosses' me and we-boosting and the incivility that they cause. The claims are wrong. Paternalism always contains messages of exclusion. Paternalism is care taking. It is about us looking after them. Properly managing the three Rs of organizational life broadens group boundaries, inhibiting an us/them perspective.

Consistency in developing rules that reward employees builds cohesion because it establishes a firm's commitment to compensate all employees without permitting the alienating disjuncture and deception that produces elites with special privileges. Similarly, affirming policies and procedures broaden the boundaries of we because they provide members of the workforce with the room and resources they need to exercise their capabilities (affirming employees as contributors), develop vocational potential (affirming employees as workers) and fulfill obligations (affirming employees as members of outside groups.) Properly managing the three Rs does not nurture bosses' me and we-boosting or the incivility they cause precisely because it discourages we/they distinctions by declaring that, "In this organization, there is no we and they. Therefore, there is no less valued them who some privileged us is free to abuse."
Copyright of Ivey Business Journal is the property of Ivey Business Journal and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.