

Stopping incivility in the workplace

'CREW' process helps firms establish culture of respect

BY MICHAEL LEITER

Somewhere today in a Canadian workplace: someone is talking loudly in the hallway, oblivious to her disruption of the concentration of others; someone is making a joke without registering it is based on a cultural stereotype that deeply offends a colleague; or a senior staff member is making a cutting remark about a trainee's competence, embarrassing him in front of colleagues and clients.

These encounters are not civil and, while they may seem minor, over time they destroy morale and create disastrous effects on individuals and the bottom line of organizations. The perpetrators are not necessarily heartless psychopaths or power-mad bullies — they are ordinary people, more clueless than evil.

At the heart of incivility is ambiguous intent — not even the perpetrator can pin down the motive behind her behaviour. While anyone has the capacity to be rude, chronic incivility within a workgroup does not bode well. Incivility is expensive. People withdraw from unpleasant social encounters by quitting, calling in sick more often or reducing their engagement with work. Rude behaviour prompts grievances and formal complaints that consume time, energy and money, while producing no benefits for clients.

While some situations can be turned around by employer intervention or a motivational speaker, other situations are firmly stuck. They require action and a serious commitment to establishing a new culture of respect.

A team of researchers at Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S., the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., Dalhousie University and St. Mary's University, both in Halifax, along with hospital leaders in Nova Scotia and Ontario, recently tested a workplace solution called CREW (civility, respect and engagement at work). They worked with colleagues from

the Veterans Health Administration in the United States, which originated CREW, and adapted it to Canada's health-care system.

The process was tested in the health-care system, a profession that has huge built-in stress factors, and the results have been impressive — what the researchers have learned can be applied at other organizations.

CREW was implemented in 15 hospital units, with another 26 units serving as controls. The results were positive: Among CREW intervention units, there were meaningful improvements in health-care workers' reports of unit civility and reductions in incivility, burnout, negative job attitudes, management distrust and absences after six months of the intervention. This improvement was substantially greater than data from control units.

How CREW works

CREW is a program that focuses on courtesy, politeness and consideration, with the premise that respect leads to an environment of honesty and mutual trust. It involves leaders, managers and employees and creates positive changes for the top line (people) and the bottom line (productivity and profits) of an organization.

CREW encompasses a series of meetings where members of a team come together to discuss issues that affect their daily work. The first sessions set the ground rules and make a safe environment. Working together, the group defines: "What is civil behaviour in our work environment?" and "What are the norms of behaviour in our group?"

Definitions may vary but there must be agreement among the group as to what they represent. Once the basic ground rules are set, the group can identify the issues on which to focus, set goals for improving teamwork and strive to achieve these goals. Civil behaviours become ingrained into the work culture as there is no longer ongoing tolerance for,

or an atmosphere that accepts, aggressive or negative behaviour. Each group is supported and guided by a facilitator who is assisted by a CREW toolkit.

The core elements of the CREW process include the following steps:

- A preparation period to introduce the concepts of civility and incivility to participants and management, and to introduce CREW as an inclusive — open to all members of a workgroup — intervention to improve these workgroup qualities.
- An initial survey to identify baselines of civility and organizational attitudes or behaviours for each workgroup.
- An initial gathering of facilitators and hospital leaders from participating organizations in the region for CREW training and community-building among participants.
- Six months of weekly CREW meetings comprising 10 to 15 employees working on the same organizational unit led by a facilitator for each unit.
- At the three-month point, a gathering of facilitators and hospital leaders from the organizations in the region for a refresher, advanced CREW training and community-building among participants.
- At the six-month point, a gathering of facilitators and hospital leaders from the organizations in the region for sustainability training and community-building among participants.

It's all about the basics

The CREW solution works from these principles:

- An effective intervention empowers the workgroup to pursue its commitment to the core values of respect and civility.
- Consistent, structured practice of new behaviours will lead to change.
- A virtuous cycle that accelerates and sustains meaningful change can be established by guiding participants to help one another improve their civility.

The CREW approach introduces a structure for change. Doing what comes naturally or what feels comfortable perpetuates the current conditions. CREW supports participants while persistently moving them out of their comfort zone.

For example, a weekly CREW meeting at one hospital continued with complaints about understaffing and grumpy doctors who had dominated conversations in the first two meetings. One woman made the point incivility was just something that happened when people were too frantic or too tired to be polite. But another participant said: "You know, we're just as rude to one another on days when we're not busy."

The room exploded, first with denials, then grudging agreement and, eventually, people accepted they had to take responsibility for their own behaviour towards one another. From the CREW toolkit, the facilitator found an exercise in which people used a code word to help one another pause during their workday to greet one another genuinely.

It's also about the bottom line

Not only does the process create a more positive work environment, it is great for an organization's bottom line. Results from surveys administered throughout the process show the CREW solution helped to decrease missed days and significantly increased employee engagement. These increased feelings of energy, involvement, confidence and dedication translated into \$240,000 more value from employees in units with 100 employees.

In the end, this also means better service for clients, as well as saving time and aggravation for managers and employees caught up in negative work situations. These positive scores persisted even one year after CREW had been implemented.

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