Tips for Confronting Incivility

Incivility is a term that encompasses a range of behaviors from the irritating (for example, cutting in line) to abusive (like bullying). Some minor instances of incivility we can simply dismiss as inconsequential; but in other situations, incivility and disrespect interfere with our relationships and our work and learning environments.

Keep in mind, people are often unaware of the way their communication or behavior is perceived by others. They may act thoughtlessly or selfishly when they are caught up in their own issues. They may be ignorant of the negative impact of certain terminology or “humor.” Sometimes, because of who we are and our background, the impact of others’ behavior on us may be far different than they intended or even understood. And, of course, sometimes people are simply rude or aggressive and might not care . . . but this is (hopefully) the exception more than the rule.

When you perceive someone’s behavior as disrespectful, take a moment to critically reflect on the situation. Consider the following questions:

Judgments and Assumptions
• What assumptions am I making about what is good and bad behavior for myself and the other person?
• What was I expecting from the other person in this situation? Why is that expectation appropriate in my eyes?
• Why do I think that person acted the way they did? What was their motivation?

Values
• Why is this situation problematic for me? What values or beliefs are involved?

The Great Unknown
• What information might I not have about the person or the situation that could help me understand why they acted as they did?
• What do I think the other person does not understand about me and/or my intentions?
• After you have taken some time to consider these questions, you might realize that there is a lot that you and the other person do not understand about each other. How do you communicate your feelings about the situation?

Try This 3-Step Approach

Step 1—Think strategically about when to approach the person.
What do you think will be most effective: Speaking up in the moment? Waiting until some time has passed so that emotional level might be diffused? Should you go alone or with someone else? Does it make sense to confront the person in front of others so that you might have some back up? Or is it better to talk alone over coffee or lunch? Is this something that has happened repeatedly in certain situations so that you could talk to the person preemptively?
Step 2—Formulate your message based on the 3 R's

Sometimes if we are angry or hurt, it’s hard to find words that won’t lead to an argument. Sometimes, we are just so taken aback by what has been said that we are left speechless. Thinking about the 3 R’s can help you craft a message that reflects your good intentions.

- **Relationship**—Let the person know that you are concerned about your relationship and the overall workplace environment. For example, you might say, “I’m coming to you with this because our working relationship is important to me. I want all of us to feel comfortable here.”

- **Respect**—Everyone deserves respect, even those who are not acting respectfully. So, thinking about word choice—what you say and how you say it—can demonstrate respect. Calling someone racist or ignorant, for example, is probably not a good way to get them to listen to you.

- **Responsibility**—Let the person know that you are speaking up because everyone is responsible for the workplace environment which should be a place where everyone feels safe and welcome. So, your intention is not to attack them but rather to point their attention to something that should concern them.

You might say, “Since you work here, I know you must be concerned about a good working environment. So I thought it would be helpful to you to let you know that . . .”

Step 3—Be assertive but be prepared for them to be defensive, and to hear another side.

The 3 R’s are a helpful way to frame your message. However, no matter how respectful and responsible you are and no matter how good your timing, you are still confronting someone about something they said or did. It’s still a critique and many people will get defensive, especially if they did not mean to hurt or offend anyone. Sometimes we are so focused on delivering our well thought-out message that we forget that the other person probably does not want to hear it. So you have to be prepared for that kind of immediate reaction to your involvement and don’t respond in kind.

You also have to be open to hearing their explanation. They may see the situation from a completely different perspective. We only experience life in our own shoes and no one holds all the stock on ‘truth.’ And it may be that there is a real difference between someone’s intentions and the impact it has. In such cases it is helpful to acknowledge the person’s intentions and say, “Okay, I get that . . . but even if you didn’t mean it to be offensive, it was . . . at least from my perspective.”

Used with permission of the University of Missouri Show Me Respect Steering Committee (©2016)