The Business Value of Civility and Courtesy

By Chris Palmer and Angeli Gabriel

Many people have recognized the importance of civility and courtesy in business settings. Treating employees and colleagues with honesty, sincerity and respect creates an environment in which people work well together and work hard.

Being able to step back and consider how your actions affect others will not only improve individual, personal interactions, but also the health of your business as a whole, as seen in the following ways:

- *Increased productivity and quality:* Showing civility and courtesy to co-workers will make them feel valued and important. By knowing that their time, energy, and overall presence is noticed, employees are likely to become more productive. In business, it's easy to treat a supervisor or CEO with the utmost respect, but treating colleagues, staff, clients, and even competitors the same way is just as important to having a productive workplace. When a person's hard work is praised and appreciated, she will naturally want to continue to produce the highest quality work.

- *Increased trust and teamwork*: When employees act respectfully to one another, they learn to trust each other and begin to operate as a team. Employees are more inclined to work efficiently and enthusiastically if they are in an environment of positive energy and surrounded by colleagues who are considerate of their well-being. Civility and courtesy will reinforce these feelings, and thereby create a network of trust and teamwork within a company. This "We" mentality will cause employees to be more thoughtful about their work, since its quality will affect their teammates and the company as a whole.

- *Increased long-term gains*: A company is only as good its products and services, which are only as good as the employees that provide them. If a company is comprised of people who conduct themselves courteously and civilly, it will be likely to create high-quality products and services to become a formidable force in the marketplace. This strong employee infrastructure will give businesses a competitive edge in the marketplace for many years to come.

Of course, talking about treating people correctly is easy, but keeping it up can be challenging. In careers like documentary filmmaking, tough competition, minimal profits, and films that fail to attract an audience can create situations in which people feel vulnerable, scared, and looking out only for themselves. In this age of instant communication, writing a disrespectful email takes two minutes, but the damage can last months. A colleague was recently angry at another colleague about how he had been described and shot back this damaging, intemperate over-reaction (and copied everyone): "I am suspicious of your motives because you have deliberately framed the discussion to make me look foolish, arrogant, and immature." Better to go see the person and discuss it one-on-one.

To maintain an atmosphere of civility and courtesy in your work, it is important to remember the following points. First and foremost, follow the golden rule: treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. Of course, this means avoiding any rude, hurtful, or disrespectful behavior, and always striving for positive, constructive interactions with people. Respond to e-mails promptly instead of ignoring them, and be good natured instead of sending snarky zingers. Show your colleagues respect by praising their work sincerely and specifically.

Additionally, one of the most important ways I have found to show respect is to be on time to meetings and other scheduled events and to not allow meetings to end later than scheduled. This shows a basic respect for other people's time. In my role as a professor at American University, I try my best to start and end classes on time in order to demonstrate to the students that I understand their time, like my own, is extremely valuable.

Remembering to be civil and courteous may be challenging at times, but maintaining a positive work environment will improve your bottom line—and it might just make everyone's day a bit more pleasant.

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