



# Work unit incivility, job satisfaction, and total quality management among transportation employees

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## ABSTRACT

Survey results from 1381 employees working in a state department of transportation tested the idea that uncivil work environments bear undesirable consequences for job satisfaction and diminish the effectiveness of quality management practices. Results demonstrated that incivility does not have to be personally experienced to have deleterious effects, merely witnessed. Perceived workplace incivility was found to adversely affect job satisfaction and the effectiveness of quality programs aimed at teamwork, customer focus and continuous improvement, even after controlling for race, gender and prior experience of harassment. Managers are advised to broaden their consideration of incivility to include its effects on observers.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade managers and employees alike have commented that American workplaces are increasingly characterized by rudeness, disrespect, and a lack of courtesy. The results of several nation-wide polls have shown that people believe workplace incivility is on the rise (Marks, 1996; Melton, 2000) and the topic has drawn the attention of the popular business press (e.g., Sutton, 2007). A 2002 study conducted by Public Agenda, for example, reported that 79% of Americans believed that a lack of courtesy is a serious problem, 61% asserted that rude behavior had increased in recent years, and 68% indicated that they had observed rude or disrespectful behavior at work (Remington and Darden, 2002). Based on multiple studies entailing 9000 employees, Pearson and Porath (2009a) found that 99% reported witnessing incivility at work and 96% claimed to have experienced incivility. Moreover, incivility is not just an American phenomenon but is international in scope (Pearson and Porath, 2005; Porath and Erez, 2009) and has permeated the virtual world as well (Lim and Teo, 2009).

Research involving transportation employees has typically focused on positive employee behaviors and how they can be promoted by developing and fostering positive attitudes on the part of transportation employees (McElroy et al., 1997, 1993). Recently researchers have undertaken efforts to look at the effects of negative attitudes and behaviors, such as workplace incivility (e.g., Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2001). This line of research has in part been fueled by research showing that the consequences on individuals of negative workplace interactions are five times more powerful than are positive interactions (Miner et al., 2005). This research has yielded insight into what workplace incivility entails, its frequency, and its impact on individual and organizational work performance. Cortina et al. (2001) found that 71% of federal court system

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employees reported personally experiencing workplace incivility during the previous 5 years. Cortina (2008) reports similar findings using university employees (75%) and law enforcement personnel (79%). Although workplace incivility is not as dramatic as overt harassment, people subjected to it seldom file formal complaints (Cortina and Magley, 2009), leaving room for it to escalate into more severe forms of hostile work behavior.

An important issue surrounding workplace incivility is whether it is a phenomenon that only affects targeted individuals. Porath et al. (2010), for example, recently found that observing incivility among employees resulted in consumers making negative inferences about that firm, the people who work in it, and how they would be treated in a future encounter with the firm. This implies that incivility may have far ranging effects. However, most of the research to date has focused on the effects of personally experienced incivility (i.e., when one is the target of incivility), but Porath et al.'s (2010) work infers that incivility may have vicarious effects on others in the work environment as well. Work environments where acts of incivility are commonly witnessed may ignite an “incivility spiral” that, over time, becomes a defining characteristic of the work climate (Andersson and Pearson, 1999) and may, in turn, have adverse “spillover” consequences for individual employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors.

## 2. Research objectives

The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues in a large state transportation organization. Every state in the US has a department of transportation and many are quite large (e.g., California employs 23,000 people, Texas employs 12,000) and incorporate a broad array of occupations (Klagge, 1995; Morrow, 1997). Examining incivility within a transportation sample provides insights for this industry and has the potential to be representative of many types of employees holding a variety of jobs. Specifically, this study seeks to advance understanding of workplace incivility by positioning incivility as a perceived attribute of the workplace environment and by examining the extent to which it adversely affects employees and what an organization might be trying to accomplish. More particularly, we look at how workplace incivility affects employee job satisfaction and the implementation of total quality management (TQM) practices. We focus on job satisfaction because of the demonstrated connection between it and outcomes such as job performance, absenteeism and turnover (Harrison et al., 2006). We focus on employees' willingness to engage in TQM practices because of TQM's widespread adoption in the US (Jun et al., 2006), its use in transportation organizations (e.g., Morrow, 1997), and because TQM has been linked to operational performance and customer service in logistics settings (Anderson et al., 1998).

## 3. Literature and research hypotheses

### 3.1. What is workplace incivility?

Some writers distinguish workplace incivility from favorable “opposite” behaviors such as prosocial organizational behavior and organizational citizenship behavior. Others position it between less intense negative workplace behaviors like ingratiation or a lack of concern for others, and more aggressive workplace behaviors such as violence, sexual harassment, bullying, mobbing, and sabotage (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Estes and Wang, 2008; Lim and Cortina, 2005; Pearson and Porath, 2004; Pearson et al., 2001). What distinguishes incivility from these other negative behaviors is that it is a milder form of mistreatment that disrupts mutual respect in the workplace but does not warrant legal action (Lim et al., 2008). Common examples of incivility behaviors are making derogatory comments about others, use of crude language, name calling, insensitive joke telling, and excluding colleagues from activities. Andersson and Pearson's definition of incivility has gained widespread acceptance. They define incivility 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.” (1999: 457). Moreover, this definition is consistent with the three generally recognized hallmarks of workplace incivility; norm violation, ambiguous intent, and low intensity (Lim et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2001).

Norm violation refers to the expectations and standards of behavior that evolve in a work unit over time regarding what level of respect employees will demonstrate toward one another. Because these norms are work unit specific, what is considered uncivil in one unit may not be viewed as uncivil in another (Lim et al., 2008). Moreover, because these norms are internalized personally (Montgomery et al., 2004), people may have different perceptions of what constitutes an uncivil act.

Ambiguous intent captures the notion that a perpetrator's uncivil behavior is not consciously intended to harm anyone (e.g., telling an off-color joke). When observed, the uncivil behavior tends to be attributed to other explanations such as the instigator's personality, ignorance or oversight (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Pearson et al., 2001). It may be however that these ambiguous behaviors actually mask discriminatory intentions (Cortina, 2008).

The third hallmark of workplace incivility is that the uncivil behaviors are not very intense; indeed they are milder forms of mistreatment, such as negative gestures or ignoring a coworker. Because the behavior is viewed as minor, it rarely is formally proscribed by organizations and does not merit legal sanctions.

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