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What happened to civility? Understanding rude behavior through the lens of organizational justice

Juliana D. Lilly

Sam Houston State University, 1821 Avenue I, Huntsville, TX 77341-2056, U.S.A.

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Abstract The ability to have polite conversation between individuals who disagree with one another seems to be a rare quality today. Organizational justice theory may help explain why rude behavior seems so prevalent and whether the rudeness in politics and society creates a polarized environment that could impact the workplace. Three recent legal decisions concerning healthcare, same-sex marriage, and the Michael Brown case, along with three workplace examples of deliberate rudeness, are examined to analyze the polarization of opposing viewpoints and the incivility that resulted from these situations. When a decision is viewed as a win-lose situation and people perceive the decision process as unfair, losers in the decision may feel threatened and react by engaging in deviant behavior that is uncivil. Winners may also engage in behavior that is uncivil and intolerant of opposing viewpoints. The result is a cycle of incivility that may include character assassination, protests, and a diminished willingness to compromise. Managers should be cognizant of the dangers of rude behavior and create a workplace environment that counters productivity interference caused by incivility and inability to compromise. I suggest specific steps to help stop workplace incivility before it starts.
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1. Why can't we agree to disagree?

Society seems to have become less polite in the last few decades as demonstrated by recent political debates in which candidates appear to focus less on issues and more on insulting those who disagree with them. In addition, the ability to have a polite, agree-to-disagree conversation seems almost impossible to find these days. For example, colleges and universities sometimes have trouble finding well-known graduation speakers who will be allowed to speak without interruption by protesters who disagree. What should be a simple disagreement between two parties today often disintegrates into an attack on the opponent's character, intelligence,

E-mail address: lilly@shsu.edu

or opportunity to express his/her viewpoint. Although disagreements have always existed, the ability to entertain opposing viewpoints in a civil manner once was considered a mark of honorable behavior indicating integrity and refinement of character. Today, however, the individual who is the rudest or most disruptive is widely applauded by supporters in many cases. What has motivated society to become more accepting of incivility? And will this behavior impact productivity in the workplace?

1.1. Win-lose decisions

The field of organizational behavior studies the attitudes and behavior of individuals and groups within organizations in an effort to learn ways to manage the overall organization more effectively. Organizational justice, one disciplinary subject area within the organizational behavior literature, often examines employee reactions to workplace decisions. Workplace decisions are sometimes distributive in nature, such that there is one winner and one loser, not unlike some political decisions, and organizational justice researchers study the conditions under which employee reactions to those decisions are positive or negative. For example, an employee may believe a decision is unfair because the employee feels threatened by the decision (Skitka, 2003) or because the employee feels excluded by the authority making the decision (Lind, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1997). The employee then acts based on the emotional feeling evoked, in these cases caused by threat or exclusion. Could individuals and groups in society be reacting the same way to political decisions that employees react to in organizational settings?

Starting with some of the most polarizing issues in the U.S. today, such as healthcare, same-sex marriage, and race relations, let us assume there are only two sides to these issues. Obviously, these issues are very complex and there are more than two sides, but for the sake of simplicity, we will assume there is one winning side and one losing side on these issues. Individuals in government positions must make decisions about political issues, and once a vote is held, one side wins and the other side loses in the classic distributive bargaining scenario.

Organizational justice researchers often ask questions such as: (1) How do you get employees to accept an unfavorable work decision and support it? (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996) or (2) Why do employees claim a decision is unfair when the decision process used to determine the outcome is, in reality, fair and unbiased (Lilly, Virick, & Hadani, 2010)? To answer these questions, researchers

have identified four different types of organizational justice—distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational (Colquitt, 2001)—and have developed and tested several organizational justice theories in various situations. Two of these theories are the relational theory of justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992) and the uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Miedema, 2000).

1.2. Perceptions of fairness and unfairness in decisions

Distributive justice is concerned with the fairness of decision outcomes (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961) and allocation of resources as a result of those decisions (Leventhal, 1980). Decisions are based on various factors such as: (1) equality, in that each individual receives an outcome equal to everyone else, (2) equity, in that each individual receives an outcome relative to what they deserve, or (3) need, in that each individual receives an outcome relative to what they need (Leventhal, 1976, 1980). Any decision based on a single factor—or viewed through the lens of a single factor—is subject to criticism. For example, an employee who is the highest performer at work may criticize an across-the-board pay increase as unfair since it rewards everyone equally regardless of performance. An employee who had an off year due to delays in work caused by a difficult merger may criticize a merit pay increase as unfair since it penalizes those whose performance was impacted by events outside their control. Employees with no families may criticize company-paid insurance that covers the families of other employees since employees with families receive more benefits than do single employees.

Procedural justice, on the other hand, refers to the procedures that lead to decision outcomes and focuses on factors such as consistency, unbiasedness, voice, and an ability to appeal the decision (Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978). Interpersonal justice refers to individuals being treated with respect and dignity as the decision process is unfolding (Bies & Moag, 1986), and informational justice refers to individuals in a decision process receiving reasonable, timely, and specific information regarding the decision process (Colquitt, 2001). Researchers have found that if a decision process treats all participants the same over time with no prejudice (consistency and unbiasedness), allows participants to present their side (voice), and has a mechanism to appeal the outcome to a higher authority (appeal), then many individuals will support the decision outcome even if it is unfavorable (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Greenberg, 1986). Likewise,