

Let's Get Civilized



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This past weekend I had an opportunity to share my thoughts on the “Top 10 Risks Facing Nonprofit Organizations,” at a conference of dedicated staff and volunteer leaders. What makes a presentation on this topic fun for me—aside from the sheer impossibility of predicting the wonderful questions I’ll get from the audience—is the fact that it allows me the flexibility to re-think, re-order and in some cases reshape my “Top 10” list for each engagement. My presentation last weekend included the first airing of a new item: “incivility.” It wound up in the #3 spot and my audience was eager to talk about the high cost and lasting damage that result when we fail to be civil to our co-workers and fellow-volunteers.

In a recent article by Susan Hauser appearing in the newsletter [Workforce Management](#), author and business school professor Christine Porath explains that stress and lost-productivity due to incivility has a multibillion-dollar price tag. Hauser’s article, titled, “The Degeneration of Decorum,” chronicles recent research on the prevalence and effects of incivility as well as special initiatives that have been developed to address incivility. Hauser describes specific programs in large agencies such as NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center and communities like Sarasota, FL. In 2007 Sarasota began a “communitywide civility initiative” called “[Because It Matters](#).” The program invites organizations throughout the community to share their civility stories and embrace “ten keys to civility.”

In an entry on his blog, *The Ethical Workplace*, published on February 9, Stephen Paskoff writes that “Civility can’t be an HR initiative or a risk management process driven by legal counsel or compliance officers; it must be initiated and directed by senior leaders responsible for the overall direction of the enterprise.” While I agree that senior leaders in an organization have an important role to play in bringing civility back, it seems to me that appreciating the risks of incivility and approaching the issue from a *risk management perspective* may not be a bad idea. And in many nonprofits, the CEO is also the chief risk officer.

Let’s face it, changing the way an organization does business can be difficult. There will always be staff and volunteer leaders hell-bent on keeping everything the way they imagine it “used to be,” and others who believe that the current culture is “good enough.” Sizing up the downside risks associated with incivility and calculating the upside benefit of change may offer the jump start you need to inspire a commitment to change and finally put a stop to productivity and morale wasting behavior.

Here’s my short list of possible targets for your campaign to end incivility:

- **Invite the Governance Committee of the Board to discuss how the board treats contrary views, dissenting opinions and members who sometimes or even frequently go against the grain.** Does a true “culture of candor” exist in the board room, where members feel comfortable and encouraged to raise their concerns in an environment of mutual respect? No Governance Committee!? Consider establishing an ad-hoc or standing committee to explore ways to improve how the board governs. If you’re sincerely committed to improving you have nothing to fear. Remember that focusing on “how” the board does business could have a very positive effect on “what” it accomplishes.
- **Reconsider accountability at the staff, volunteer and leadership levels.** How effective are supervisors in holding their direct reports accountable—not only for outcomes and results, but also for how they treat their peers, subordinates and superiors? Does bad behavior go unnoticed or overlooked? Either result is intolerable in an organization whose culture insists on respect and kindness to others. Holding the board accountable is understandably challenging. If you haven’t already done so, read our “take” on this important topic featured in *Risk Management Essentials*.
- **Revisit civility from a client or customer’s standpoint.** What do clients, service recipients, members or consumers experience when they visit your organization or reach out for help? Is the commitment to treating those you serve with dignity, kindness and respect clear from the moment a client crosses the threshold? If not, where are the problem areas and what is required to address them without delay? Do you welcome complaints, or make it hard to express disappointment or dissatisfaction? The Center’s online tool, [My Risk Management Policies](#), offers a range of options for creating client grievance and complaint policies.
- **Reconsider your written policies with an eye towards civility.** Make certain that your actions live up to the ideals expressed in your written policies. And if your aspirations for a workplace where colleagues treat each other with respect are not reflected in your written policies, your policies are overdue for an overhaul.

It’s easy to allow disagreements on substantive issues to degenerate. And while you can pick the members of your circle of cherished friends, we generally don’t have the luxury of handpicking our relatives or the people with whom we labor to achieve a nonprofit’s mission. But just as you’ve learned to be respectful to your peculiar uncle and be well-mannered while seated at your grandmother’s dining table, *you can resolve to learn more about what civility really means to the success of your nonprofit*. Remember that you have the opportunity to inspire others to embrace civility and make kindness a hallmark of your nonprofit. The commitment to ending incivility is not only important to advancing the mission of the nonprofit you serve; it will serve your mission well and in countless ways for years to come.

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