

On civility and the practice of virtue ©

Dr Neil Preston

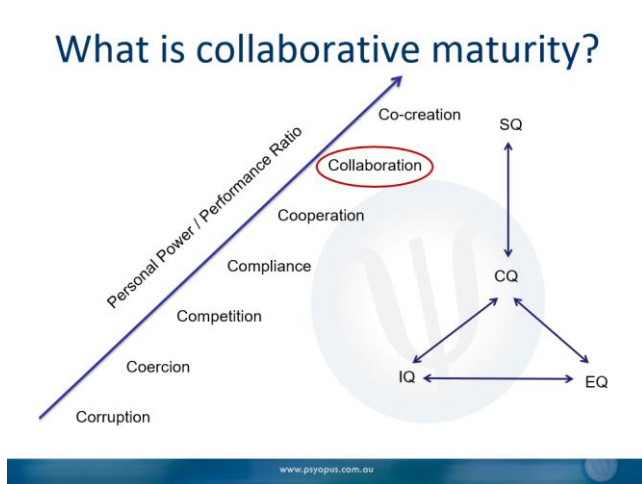
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Rudeness is the new black

Have you ever experienced rude behaviour at work? If you have you are not alone. In 1998, 25% of people surveyed reported being treated rudely at least once a week at work. This self-report has doubled to 50% by 2011. Is being uncivil the new black? Is it the way to get things done – is it worthy of imitation for leaders as a practice of virtue?

What is incivility?

Simply, incivility is a form of rudeness or inconsideration of others. It comes in many forms and includes abruptness, impatience, belittling, rumouring or gossiping and intimidation. In our collaborative maturity model, it is much further down the continuum somewhere between competition and coercion and employs levels of both personal power and in some case psychopathology.



Incivility becomes a form of perverse motivation where fear is used as an agent to motivate behaviour and performance. Since we are imitative creatures this form of behaviour can be easily adopted in a culture where such a value of perverse motivation becomes normative, or simply put *the way we do things around here*. So in a sense, incivility is a kind of rationale a form of motivational theory exercised by tyrants up and down the ages. It seems people are rude for a

good reason, they believe it gets things done – but does it – what does social psychology experiments have to say about incivility?

Motivating others by being a bastard -the evidence

Leadership for me is simply defined as values and behaviours worthy of imitation. We imitate each other and so look to others for values and external behaviours worthy to imitate. To get along we see what is the going culture – that is, the values and assumptions that underlie behaviours within an organisation. Research has shown even low levels of incivility (being a bit of a bastard) resulted in poor performance on cognitive tasks. Groups exposed to rude instructors where they had to perform a functional task like complete a series of anagrams from the word “remdue” or creative tasks – to come up with as many creative uses for a house brick, performed 33% worse on the functional task and 39% worse on the creative task. Indeed, when a group was exposed to the rudeness of a stranger unrelated to the experiment this dropped 61% and 50% on the respective functional and creative tasks. What was insightful was groups exposed to rudeness were more likely to come up with the word “murder” than the word “demure” from anagram “remdue” and to consider the house brick as a weapon! Ouch! In a sense, groups subject to rudeness responded to high negative expressed emotion with thoughts of revenge than cooperation.

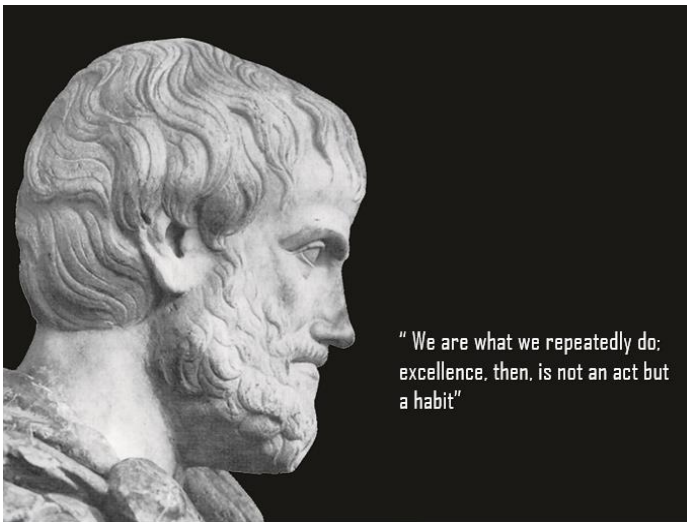
So being a bit of a bastard is poor motivational theory if the rationale is that it improves either functional or creative tasks – but the rationale persists!

The cost of incivility

A pool of some 800 managers across 17 industries reported workers on the receiving end of incivility decreased their work effort by 48% and intentionally increased the quality of work by 38% with some 66% saying there was a decline in their work performance. Rude people at work make other people largely unproductive not to mention the more serious psychopathological symptoms of anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Rudeness does not work either in the short or long term but it seems it is on the increase in organisations.

But why is incivility on the increase?

Aristotle once said that “we are what we repeatedly do; excellence, then, is not an act but a habit”. In ye oldie world speak this was “the practice of the virtues”. Could it be that the practice of civil virtues like patience, reciprocity, turn taking and humility not seen as virtues anymore? Could the Nietzschean “will to power” trump the weaker virtues to be seen as the strong man or woman? If these virtues are within an organisation either explicitly or implicitly they will be imitated because imitation is what social creatures do.



Aristotle argued that virtues were like a muscle that needed to be exercised in order for them to be strong. If our organisations are exercise gyms for rude behaviour it is difficult if not impossible to sustain virtuous behaviour. The muscles of positive virtue are weakened in a culture where they are not worthy of imitation nor are their conditions conducive for them to arise and be sustained.

Confronting rude people at work is a difficult art and cannot be explored in detail here and best visited or revisited on the Creating Collaborative Leaders online program <http://psyopus.teachable.com/> There are some good tips there but suffice to say the BIFF acronym of confronting a rude person is helpful and that is be Brief – Informative – Friendly and Firm. In all things one must model the very opposite behaviour of a bully or rude colleague. The old saying “be careful wrestling with pigs because most of them like the mud” should be kept in mind.



So what is a leader to do in this age of the neo-barbarian?

I think one should employ mindfully the advice of Aristotle – that is practice virtues worthy of imitation. Essentially the first trick is to manage yourself. Leaders set the tone in an organisation and regulating your own emotional response to rude people is helpful. Secondly be aware of your behaviour and impact on others, be curious about how people perceive you and ask whether exercising fear is part of your theory of motivating behaviour? Thirdly model good virtuous behaviour stop imitating “leaders behaving badly”. Gossip and other social bonding behaviours should be avoided, especially when it castigates, excludes or participates in the scapegoating mechanism (see Paper 8 – On the Shadow Organisation for details). And finally, check in, ask for feedback and be prepared to listen to difficult home truths and blind spots in your behaviour – absorbing criticism is a virtue that does not escalate the cycle of attack and defence so common on our social media platforms and other modern ways of communicating. Is it better to be feared or loved (admired)? The answer to this lies in your choice on how you practice the virtues.

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