

# Workplace Incivility and the Management of Human Capital

*How to build a community where people feel included, welcomed, and work together with mutual respect to enhance individual and organizational productivity.*

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**T**he events of September 11 have helped the American people understand that an effective federal government is essential to preserving our democracy and way of life. To keep our democracy strong, however, the federal government needs to recruit and retain employees who are skilled and committed to achieving compelling results for the American people. Unfortunately, we face a human capital crisis precipitated by the fact that approximately one-half of all federal employees are eligible to retire by 2005. The General Accounting Office has been encouraging agencies to reform recruiting and hiring systems, reward and recognition practices, training and development programs, and enrich work assignments—all for the purpose of recruiting and retaining first-rate talent. If government is going to consistently transform policy into compelling results for the American people, it must address these issues.

## Workplace Climate

Often absent from discussions of the human capital crisis, however, is the climate of the workplace. Feelings of alienation and distrust are often the consequence of acts of incivility. As an example, one Presidential Management Intern (PMI) indicated to me that, throughout a four-month period, his supervisor never expressed dissatisfaction with his work or his attitude. He was quite surprised, then, to discover that his supervisor had been telling many people in the organization that he is arrogant and is reluctant to take on most work assignments. He was stunned to hear this information and immediately went to his supervisor saying, "I apologize for anything that I may have done to offend you or any one else. I was unaware that I had come across as arrogant." He asked for specific feedback several times in the meeting, but she just remained silent.

Finally, the supervisor just ended the meeting by saying, "There is nothing here that can't be fixed." Unfortunately,

he never found out what he needed to fix. He left wondering if his reputation was damaged, whether he would be unable to obtain promising rotations, or would be able to turn his PMI into a permanent position. He could only speculate as why the supervisor had this impression. Did he really need to change his interpersonal style? Did she dislike all PMIs? Was someone feeding her distorted information? He will never know. But her broadly communicated negative judgements and inability to be clear with him increased the probability that government will lose this talented young individual to the private or nonprofit sector.

## Incivility in the Public Sector

Scott Peck would describe instances such as this as a kind of everyday incivility that creates needless suffering in organizations. In his words, "Instances of gross incivility—torture, rape, murder, criminal child abuse, and so on—abound. As horrifying as outrageous incivility is, our everyday incivility is responsible for a vaster amount of human misery." Apparently the American public agrees. A poll commissioned by *US News and World Report* determined that nine out of 10 Americans think incivility is a serious problem, and 78 percent say the problem has worsened in the past 10 years.

If incivility is a systemic problem in American society, how does it present itself in organizational life? In one study of 1,180 public-sector employees, 71 percent reported some experience of workplace incivility in the previous five years. Have as many as one-third of the most powerful individuals within these organizations instigated these uncivil

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acts? How do employees react when experiencing incivility in the workplace? To gain insight on these questions, I conducted two-hour interviews with 20 employees at various levels in public and nonprofit organizations. My mission was to understand how people experience incivility from a very personal perspective and to tell their stories. This article first defines everyday incivility, and will then describe how employees think, feel, and act when they experience incivility in organizational life, touching as well on how incivility impacts the ability of organizations to retain a loyal and committed workforce. Finally, it proposes an approach to combating incivility in the workforce.

### Defining Everyday Incivility

People often take everyday incivility to mean impolite behavior or bad manners. This definition is insufficient because self-serving and manipulative motives could underlie polite behavior. A manager, for example, might go out of his way to be polite prior to a multi-rater management effectiveness survey. His motive may simply be to enhance the score on the instrument, not to create a pleasant work environment. Conversely, the expression of good manners, a thank you, or standing when a person enters the office, may be an expression of genuine respect. In this case, politeness is a reflection of civility. One could also identify instances where what on the surface appears to be impolite behavior actually turns out to be a very civil act. A boss might provide blunt and harsh feedback to an employee whose performance is below standard, even using threatening phrases such as, "You had better shape up or your tenure here will be very short." Even though the message is transmitted in an impolite manner, the manager may be genuinely concerned for the well-being of the employee. Civility, then, is not always about being nice. In the workplace, anger may also be expressed in the passion of the moment when well-intentioned people are working in good faith to do the best thing for the organization.

### Two Cornerstones

What, then, is a more accurate description of civility? Several authors offer insight on the distinguishing characteristics of civil behavior. Scott Peck identifies two cornerstones of civility:

- the capacity, on both an individual and organizational level, to distinguish between necessary, legitimate suffering and that which is unnecessary or excessively convoluted; and
- the willingness to meet head-on that suffering which inevitably exists in our individual and collective lives.

For example, unnecessary suffering occurs when a manager calls a meeting to discuss a subject, and then differs with every observation or comment, and otherwise stifles candor. Peck's point about "meeting head-on" refers to ameliorating necessary suffering when it occurs. For example, during a period of downsizing, a civil act would be

Figure 1

## Workforce Consequences of Incivility

- 28 percent lost work time avoiding the instigator.
- 53 percent lost work time worrying about the incident or future interactions.
- 37 percent believed that their commitment to the organization declined.
- 22 percent decreased their effort at work.
- 10 percent decreased the amount of time that they spent at work.
- 46 percent contemplated changing jobs to avoid the instigator.
- 12 percent actually changed jobs to avoid the instigator.

SOURCE: Study by Christine M. Pearson and her fellow researchers of 775 workers.

to provide those losing their jobs with the earliest possible notification, the emotional support of colleagues, and the resources to help make a successful transition into their next job.

### Freedom from Barbarity

Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau define civility as "freedom from barbarity." They further contend that a civil environment is based on an infrastructure of dignity entitlements as well as reciprocal responsibilities. Examples of such dignity entitlements are the right to be heard, to receive recognition in proportion to one's contributions, to receive fair evaluations based on performance rather than personality style, professional background, race, gender, sexual preference, or some other personal characteristic. Reciprocal responsibilities might include protecting the organization's technical secrets, providing early warning on impending problems, and striving to build an effective working relationship with colleagues and bosses.

### Equal Concern and Respect

Ronald Dworkin contends that organization members, due simply to their status as persons, have "a universal right to be treated with equal concern and respect." Introducing his words "concern" and "respect" into the equation, we can conclude that a manager who listens carefully to what subordinates have to say is exhibiting civil behavior. Dworkin and John Rawls argue that incivility is grounded in words

or actions that diminish others' self-esteem. In an organizational setting, a supervisor who never recognizes the achievements of staff, and pounces on every mistake, may diminish self-esteem to the extent that employees lose confidence in their own abilities. We now have several principles that when integrated provide the definition of incivility used in this article:

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**A supervisor who never recognizes the achievements of staff, and pounces on every mistake, may diminish self-esteem to the extent that employees lose confidence in their own abilities.**

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- Incivility in organizations is evidenced by disrespectful behavior that undermines the dignity and self-esteem of employees and creates unnecessary suffering. In general, behaviors of incivility indicate a lack of concern for the well-being of others and are contrary to how individuals expect to be treated.
- Having defined the term, let us now explore the consequences of incivility in organizational life as revealed in the interviews undertaken for this study.

### **Some Consequences of Incivility**

Potential for organizational effectiveness is enhanced greatly when people trust each other. Unfortunately, trust is often undermined when incivility permeates an organization culture. The inevitable consequence is that employees will reduce their involvement with colleagues and the organization, as indicated in Figure 1, p. 37.

### **Divorcement**

These statistics suggest that acts of incivility cause an emotional separation from not only the instigator but also the organization. Richard Huseman and John Hatfield coined the phrase "divorcement" to describe this process of separation. In an organization, separation may take the form of employees reporting to work late, taking extended breaks and lunch hours, using excessive sick days, and going down to the lunchroom when they do not expect to see their boss. They may even take circuitous routes so they do not have to go by the offender's office, communicating only when absolutely necessary by e-mail. Obviously, this affects an organization's productivity! Libby Forester, a director of management development, said the following about an abusive boss:

Our productivity has been affected by the abusive demeanor of my boss. His favorite meeting place was across his desk—on

his side is a large executive chair, on your side is a rail of smaller chairs. He's always in the position of power. When he started a sentence with, "Do you mean to tell me," you knew you were about to be abused. I wouldn't mind it if his anger was based on a fair assessment of our work, or if we had violated an important customer service principle. In most cases, however, he was personally involved in an ill-considered decision that led to the problem in the first place. His angry message focused on blaming others, and he delivered it so that the person on the other side of the desk clearly understood who was the "Division Director and Ruler of the Universe." As a result of his demeanor, the rank and file avoided him. He doesn't get the benefit of learning what his staff has to offer. To avoid his abuse, competent professionals in his organization don't seek promotions.

When an organization or divisions within an organization do not perform to expectations, we often focus on reasons such as skill base of employees, budgeted resources for research and development, organization structure, or unexpected emergencies that divert resources elsewhere. All of these can be important, but we often fail to consider that the underlying breakdown may stem from acts of incivility that create distrust, low morale, and limited commitment to organizational goals.

### **Forms of Incivility**

#### *Violating Relationships*

The most damaging form of incivility diminishes a person's professional identity. Incivility around Daren Zober's newly diagnosed cancer speaks to this point:

Daren Zober, a 38-year-old manager in a government agency, had just been diagnosed with cancer. His doctors told him that he would probably live many good years and that he should fully engage in life. Unfortunately, there appeared to be no cure at that particular time. A psychologist friend suggested he tell a few trusted friends so that he would receive support in his struggle for survival. Following his psychologist's advice, he called Greg Sopal, a peer at the agency. Shocked and concerned, Greg ended the conversation by saying, "Let me know if I can do anything." On the following Friday, one week after the diagnosis, Daren came in late to the meeting of the assistant secretary. As he sat down, the assistant secretary said, "Greg has told us that you have cancer. It's better for all of us that the information be public." Daren was stunned. He couldn't believe that his friend would violate their relationship in this manner. At that point, Daren's relationship with Greg began to disintegrate. A third party facilitator was brought in to meet with Daren and Greg to help repair the damage. At that meeting the facilitator asked Greg why he had divulged the information. Greg, admitting to feeling ashamed, said he wanted the assistant secretary to see him as an informed insider.

To make matters worse, three weeks later the assistant secretary's yearly strategic plan included a discussion of the need to hire a replacement in the next few years because of "staff health problems." The document was distributed throughout the organization. Daren knew that the assistant secretary was talking about him, and lost hope of being treated fairly in an organization that had already begun a "death watch." Because of his uncertain health, he stayed with the agency, even though his career had reached a plateau. As it turned out, Daren worked more than 10 years be-

# NOW WE ARE 30

**I**t was 1972: President Nixon had not yet been re-elected overwhelmingly. The Watergate was not a particularly well-known landmark in Washington DC. The Chicago Cubs were not expected to win the pennant.

Among the troops of the National Capital Area Chapter (NCAC) of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), something had been stirring for a while. It was the notion that there was a need for a practitioner-oriented journal. With NCAC funding of the first issue, our founders, led by founding editor *Tom Lynch*, produced Volume 1, Number 1 of *The Bureaucrat*, the journal of, by, and for practitioners in government at all levels and their friends.

Tom Lynch was succeeded by Tom Novotny, who began (oops) was succeeded by Paul Weiss, and then by current editor Warren Master. They had the support of more than 300 feature editors and members of our board

of editors. The incumbents among these worthies are listed on our inside front cover. Salute them and consider joining them.

Ten years ago we morphed into *The Public Manager*, The Quarterly for Practitioners. The game's the same with a different, more generic name.

We received strong, direct support from NCAC/ASPA in the early years and, since 1977, have been sponsored or co-sponsored by the Federal Executive Institute Alumni Association, for whose members the journal is a benefit of membership. These partnerships, and others we are creating, are responsible for our promising future.

I can't resist it. Place your trust in those over 30—at least in the journal field. And thanks for joining us on the ride.

—*Thomas W. Novotny*,  
Publisher

fore needing medical treatment. He is presently cancer free and has a chance for a cure.

## Snubbing

The following example reveals a less damaging form of incivility to the individual. However, this transgression of civility wounded two loyal employees who began to think differently about the level of commitment they would bring to the organization.

Steve Dwak and Emily Gallagher, two university staff known for educational entrepreneurship, developed four mid-career graduate programs that brought in several million dollars of income to their university—the profits from which provided discretionary funds for the dean. Steve and Emily had very little start-up money, and even picked up used furniture from vacated offices of the university to furnish the program office. They worked seven-days-a-week and many evenings to develop and implement the programs.

Despite the success of their programs, Steve and Emily received modest raises since these entrepreneurial activities did not fit the university's established evaluation criteria. Despite the feelings that the university administration was being unjust, Steve and Emily remained committed to these programs. That commitment changed when, one afternoon, they saw workmen furnishing other offices in their building with new desks, filing cabinets, bookcases, and computers.

There was one exception—no furniture was delivered to Steve and Emily's small office suite. When Steve asked the dean why, he was told, "We very much appreciate what you have done to provide funds for the furniture, but you will not be receiving furniture because some faculty might complain that we are spending money on nontraditional programs. It is better if you keep a low profile." Outraged, Steve and Emily's fervor for creating any new programs was quickly extinguished.

## Coping Styles

People expect, want, and need to be treated with respect. When this does not happen, they express their dissatisfaction in a variety of ways. The styles of coping discussed here illustrate how employees respond to acts of incivility in organizations.

### Rationalization

Some employees simply internalize the suffering and rationalize their situation by reasoning that life is unfair, or they may think that, "It's bad here, but probably worse somewhere else. At least here I know what I need to contend with." Rationalizers try to make peace with their fate. Unfortunately, the cost of this form of internal suffering is often high blood pressure, a suppressed immune system, depression, and other physical symptoms resulting from emotional distress.

**Figure 2**

## **Statement of Civility Rights**

All employees in our organization have the right to:

- receive a fair assessment of their performance;
- receive recognition commensurate with their contribution;
- be treated as unique individuals who can operate without concern for being stereotyped based on physical characteristics, nationality, religion, gender, sexual preference, or personality characteristics;
- develop their full potential in the organization;
- receive coaching and training to enhance their skills and value to the organization;
- receive negative feedback in private and in a manner that is specific, timely, and exhibits concern for their well-being, career, and job security;
- be given an opportunity to build their competence in a deficient area of performance before being punished or fired;
- be given information on organizational norms and performance expectations;
- receive a hearing about any concern or opportunity they want to bring to the attention of the organization;
- have privacy rights respected about health or other matters that could have an impact on opportunities in the organization;
- receive a fair opportunity to compete for job openings or career-enhancing assignments and, when unsuccessful in that competition, be told where they fell short;
- express constructive opinions without concern that it will lead to organization shunning or exile; and
- have the good faith cooperation from individuals at all levels of the organization in efforts to further organizational goals.

### ***Withholding Full Commitment***

Some employees make the decision to give less to the organization as a result of incivility. As one respondent said, "Why should I kill myself for an organization that takes my contributions for granted?" In the words of a grants manager, "This organization doesn't deserve my passion. I no longer stay at work until 7:00 p.m. trying to find innovative solutions to our problems." Another respondent said, "I hate to say this, but I've learned how to meet the basic expectations of the organization. No one can say that I'm not

doing my job. But what they don't know is that I could be giving them 30 percent more creative effort."

### ***Seeking Change***

Employees who seek change are likely to be more loyal to the organization. They may try to persuade the perpetrator of the incivility to change his or her behavior. When such efforts are unsuccessful, the individual may then move toward a form of "divorcement." A young lawyer's experience in a government agency illustrates this kind of response to workplace incivility. As Mary Sweeney tells it:

I began to work with Tom Cleary, a senior manager who had been brought into the agency because of his expertise in a particular area of law. One day he came to me and said that he would like to write an article for a legal trade journal, and requested that I research and write a first draft. So I researched and wrote a 20-page paper. In citing authorship, I put his name first, and my name second. He made no changes to the article itself, but without saying a word to me he deleted my name from the article. I walked into his office and said to him, "I'm really shocked. There probably has been a mistake, but I walked by your secretary's desk, saw the article I wrote, and my name was nowhere on it. I'm sure it's a mistake." Tom said, "Oh, there's no mistake. It was presumptuous for you to put your name there in the first place. I wrote many articles when I was starting out and was not given credit. That's the way it works." Mary replied, "Tom, in this organization, if an associate writes an article for a senior manager, the associate's name is always there as co-author." He said, "Well, I'll talk to the others and see what I can do. The next thing I knew, his secretary told me what he had decided to do. He had placed his name up top as author. At the bottom of the page was a small footnote saying, "The author greatly appreciates the assistance of Mary H. Sweeney, Esq." I went into his office and said, "I thought I wrote this. You got away with murder here."

As Mary tells it, after this experience, she stopped thinking of this job as her life. She did her work, maintained a professional demeanor, and quietly looked for a job elsewhere. Mary soon left the government to join the legal staff of a corporation that does business with the government. She is now a highly valued vice president.

### ***Retribution***

In response to acts of incivility, some individuals seek to "even the score" by finding subtle, unobtrusive ways to undermine the offending party. Mary, for example, had this to say about her response to not being cited as co-author of the article.

I spent a lot of time working on one of Tom's projects for a senior manager with close ties to the agency head. He indicated on several occasions that he didn't feel that Tom was performing well. Off the record, I let him know that I agreed with his assessment of Tom. I probably damaged Tom. If I had respected him, I would have told Tom what they were saying and worked with him to turn his identity problem around. But I was more than happy to see him lose the respect of the senior agency officials and perhaps be encouraged to leave or to receive marginal assignments.

When people are treated improperly, it is only human for the victims to seek justice in ways that are available to

them. A subtle comment to a senior official in the lunch line, not informing the boss of an impending problem, and letting others know about mistakes the boss made, are just a few of the ways that subordinates can even the score.

### *Emulating Incivility*

Another way of coping with incivility is to emulate it. One respondent said, "You start treating people with less respect when you are thrown into a less civil environment. You defend yourself, but in defending yourself you sink to their level if the prevailing behavior is to disrespect others." In some cases, this behavior is based on people's unconscious need for inclusion, to fit in, and feel part of an organization. One respondent's analysis of his organization's culture exemplifies this principle:

Charley Greenberg, the assistant commissioner of our agency, is rather cynical. He believes that people are basically lazy and will do as little work as they can get away with. He most admires ambitious managers who are tough, demanding, threatening, and unsympathetic to people's everyday concerns. As a symbol of his toughness, he doesn't wear a coat in the winter-time. Soon after he came, aspiring leaders in the agency also stopped wearing coats—even in 30-degree weather. Managers are expected to endure difficult times and conceal any feelings of uncertainty or personal distress. They need to demonstrate that they are always in control and will fire or harshly criticize employees who disagree with a decision. Even mild criticism by associates is seen as disloyalty and will be punished. The punishment may be in the form of a public rebuke, modest raises, a reduced budget, less access to decision making, and/or inferior office space. A tough demeanor and willingness to punish the troops is a badge of honor, and all new managers need to demonstrate it to be seen as having the right stuff for leadership.

It wasn't long before uncivil behaviors were cascading throughout the organization. Hardly anybody trusted managers or the organization to treat people with respect. A consultant was eventually brought in to find out why employee turnover was the highest in the agency's history.

### *Exit the Scene*

Acts of incivility can also incite people to leave the organization. This story of Valerie Smith makes the point:

I was director of community services at our religious, non-profit local community hospital. We receive federal funding to provide social services to disadvantaged populations. In this capacity, I was in charge of leading community task forces to create a countywide sexual assault center, a teen pregnancy program, and an in-house hospitalwide domestic violence detection, intervention, and prevention program. We were able to make significant in-roads in addressing these problems and were receiving national attention for these initiatives. One day, I received a call from our national association indicating that I would be receiving their top leadership recognition for my work in community advocacy, particularly with respect to the domestic violence program. The program would also receive a "Model That Works Award" from the Department of Health and Human Services. I was extremely honored, excited and filled with a deep sense of joy.

In this state of mind, I picked up the phone and called my CEO. When I told him about the honor, he said, "How did they

**Figure 3**

## **Statement of Employee Responsibility**

All employees in our organization are obligated to:

- help their bosses be effective in carrying out the mission of their unit;
- provide important information to bosses and peers in a timely manner;
- share your knowledge and insight with others to enhance their effectiveness;
- refrain from bringing unwarranted legal suits when personnel decisions do not go their way;
- receive appropriate feedback in an open and receptive manner—striving to see it as a benefit that can enhance their careers; and
- cooperate completely with colleagues to enhance organizational performance.

find out about this program? You did not have permission to submit this program. You have to call them back immediately and tell them you can accept this award with your name on it, only if the hospital's name is on it. And you will need to use your conference money to attend. If it is not in the budget, you will need to pay your own way or simply not go.

I was dumfounded, numb, and could hardly speak. I began to question my own actions until my husband helped me to see how crazy a reaction this was. I did decide to go to both award ceremonies and took my children. We celebrated regardless. Due to my commitment to these projects, I stayed for six months of continual disregard of the human spirit before leaving for another job. I have been working on my forgiveness, and believe the CEO must have been a very wounded man.

Valerie's story reveals an event where her supervisor was frustrating her efforts to obtain the public recognition she deserved. According to Pearson, "In many organizations power corrupts as status differentials enable the more powerful to debase the less powerful." One respondent said, "I've been somewhere where incivility pervaded the organization, and I was miserable. If I'm not treated with respect on the job, that causes me tremendous pain. I work very hard to maintain a network of contacts. I never want to be in a position of being stuck in a highly unpleasant work situation."

### **Some Recommendations**

When there is transgression of norms of civility, the trust, loyalty, and commitment of employees inevitably declines. The best prevention is for organizations to define

standards of civility expected of everyone and to develop programs that reinforce these standards. The following actions can build a culture of civility in organizations:

### *Communicate the Message from Senior Management*

The words and actions of senior leaders are watched carefully by employees and set the tone for others to follow.

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It is usually more painful to be civil  
than it is to be uncivil. It takes courage  
to give appropriate feedback and to  
receive that feedback in a  
nondefensive manner.

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Leaders also have an opportunity to build a civil environment by admonishing those who transgress norms of civility. A case in point is what took place at a senior management meeting in a government agency. During this meeting, Dorothy Conner, the chief financial officer, admonished Steve Welton, the chief information officer, in front of his peers for not providing on-time services to his staff. Steve was shocked and embarrassed—and had no idea what the Dorothy was talking about. After the meeting, Anna Virbig, who was the assistant secretary, called Dorothy into her office and told her that she should have discussed the problem with Steve privately, and that an apology to him was in order. This two-minute meeting strongly reinforced the message that “civility” matters in this organization.

### *Develop Principles of Civility Rights and Responsibilities*

An additional way of clarifying expectations of civility is to develop a statement of rights and responsibilities. This statement would emphasize behaviors that are respectful of others, exhibit concern, and enhance employee self-esteem. Employee groups at any level of the organization will have no trouble identifying the forms of civility they would value in their organizational culture. A few of the possibilities are included in Figure 2.

This statement of civility rights obligates the organization to give conscious attention to issues of civility and should be accompanied by a statement of employee responsibilities (as in Figure 3).

These rights and responsibilities are simply illustrative. An organization should develop its code only after conducting a survey and extensive interviews with people at all levels of the organization. The survey should include questions to assess the extent to which a culture of civility exists in the organization.

### *Civility Assessment Criteria*

Leaders wanting a more civil culture must include civility behaviors as evaluation criteria. In performance evaluations, document behaviors that cross the line regarding incivility and provide corrective feedback without regard to the formal position of the individual. When this is done, employees then will pay more attention to their personal behavior, particularly when those who consistently transgress civility guidelines find it more difficult to receive promotions.

### *Include Civility in Agency Training*

Formal classroom training and orientation sessions for new employees should include material on civility. This will help reinforce the importance of civility as an organizational value. During the first days and months on the job, new employees form powerful impressions of what truly is expected of people. If they learn that the organization discourages behaviors such as unbridled competition, public persecution of colleagues, the withholding of cooperation, and the punishment of risk takers, then these behaviors will be less prevalent in the organization.

### **Conclusion**

According to Scott Peck, “Civility is never painless. In fact, it is usually more painful to be civil than it is to be uncivil.” It takes courage to give appropriate feedback and to receive that feedback in a nondefensive manner. It takes courage to tell a subordinate or colleague that their behavior transgressed the rights of another person. This person may turn on you, or see you as an idealist who cannot be trusted. More often than not, however, the instigator will moderate or stop the abusive behavior.

One of the highest accomplishments of an organization is to build a community where people feel included and welcomed, and work together with mutual respect to enhance individual and organizational productivity. This type of environment will be instrumental in attracting and retaining quality personnel for the public sector. When people work in a civil environment, more of their collective energy is available for strengthening organizational performance focused on providing the American public with high value for their tax dollar. This is what the public trust is about. ■

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