

The Five Fundamentals of Civility for Physicians:

initiating an important conversation — series introduction

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A SENIOR MEDICAL STUDENT ON A SURGICAL ROTATION WALKS INTO THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT OF A TEACHING HOSPITAL IN RESPONSE TO A PAGE FROM THE ATTENDING ER PHYSICIAN. SEEING THE STUDENT APPROACH, THE ER DOC ROLLS HIS EYES AND SAYS: “IF YOUR RESIDENT ISN’T RIGHT BEHIND YOU, TURN AROUND AND LEAVE NOW.”

A freshly graduated family doctor attending his patients in a community hospital general ward is having trouble finding a stethoscope that works properly. He gathers them all up, marches into the office of the purchasing officer, drops them on her desk and sharply states: “How am I to do my job if none of these things are any good?”

A senior physician, convinced of his own good ideas and certainty of perspective, talks over his colleagues at a departmental meeting, diminishing their contributions.

I recognize these kinds of behaviour. The medical student, the young family doctor, the senior physician: they are all me. Are these examples of disruptive

behaviour? Possibly. Unprofessional behaviour? That might be a stretch. But it’s easy to identify these kinds of behaviour as lacking in civility.

The Definition Of Civility

What do we mean by “civility?” The dictionary is brief and constricted, defining civility simply as polite, or courteous behaviour. Civility is that, no doubt, but it is more. Civility is not just a synonym for politeness or courtesy. Perhaps civility is most easily recognized by its absence. An interaction characterized by uncivil behaviour leaves one feeling uncomfortable, fundamentally disrespected, diminished and ostracized. Civility, then, achieves the opposite effect.

Civility has many dimensions that involve oneself, others, as well as the community and culture we share. According to Forni: “Although we can describe the civil as courteous, polite and well-mannered, etymology reminds us that they are also supposed to be good citizens and good neighbors.”¹

Davetian² says that civility is characterized by: “The extent to which citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others as well as the welfare of the culture they share in common.”²

My favourite definition of civility comes from the U.S.-based Institute for Civility in Government: “Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is

about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one's preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone's voice is heard, and nobody's is ignored."³

Spath and Dahnke, founders of the Institute for Civility in Government, remind us that civility is about self-care as well: "Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process."

For the purpose of discussion in this and subsequent articles, an uncivil behaviour is one which lacks the attributes of civility, and incivility refers to a condition characterized by the absence of civility in social interactions.

The Consequences Of Incivility

Michael Leiter has written extensively on workplace incivility and its con-

sequences. In his book, *Analyzing and Theorizing the Dynamics of the Workplace Incivility Crisis*, he describes the negative impacts of incivility in health care and other workplaces.⁴

Individuals experience incivility as personal stress, distress, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic disorders and burnout. Naturally these individuals are hard pressed to live up to their productivity potential. Some individuals experiencing uncivil behaviour may, in turn, retaliate by directing unwanted and unhelpful behaviours towards co-workers and the organization itself.

I once interviewed a doctor who was referred for help with his workplace behaviour. One complaint lodged against him came from a nurse who was offended when the doctor said something like: "I've only asked you to do one thing, and you can't even get that right."

I used that situation as an example for a group of residents that I was teaching about respectful workplace behaviour. One resident earnestly asked me to explain what was wrong with the comment made in this example. He said, "That nurse deserved what she got. She should go home, have a good

cry, and perform better at work after that. That's how I have learned."

I am concerned by that response. Even if it has been a part our medical culture, is shaming learners or co-workers ever an effective teaching strategy?

Organizations, as well as individuals, pay a price for incivility. Costs to the organization are employee absenteeism, diminished engagement and increased turnover as workers leave the organization prematurely. Persisting, even subtle, incivility in the workplace creates an environment that is psychologically unsafe and difficult to endure — one that creates worker unhappiness and under-performance at the least, and drives people away at the worst. Along with the psychological costs, incivility can have striking fiscal costs to the organization, although precise calculations can be difficult to obtain.

Even small acts of incivility can contaminate the culture of a workplace. Unaddressed and uncorrected, there can be an insidious infusion of risk and insecurity into the social environment at work, creating a spiral of uncivil behaviours, reactions, and retaliations. The unstated, but actual, code of conduct becomes a code of incivility.

Five Fundamentals Of Civility

1

Respect Others and Yourself

Treat everyone in the workplace, regardless of role, with respect — even those we barely know, disagree with, or dislike. Respect for others requires inclusivity while observing healthy boundaries. Self-respect is key.

2

Be Aware

Civility is a deliberate endeavour, requiring conscious awareness of oneself and others. Mindfulness and reflective practice enhance awareness.

3

Communicate Effectively

Civil communication is more about how we say it as much as what we say. Or do. Effective communication is critical at times of tension or when the stakes are high.

4

Take Good Care of Yourself

It's hard to be civil when personally stressed, distressed, or ill.

5

Be Responsible

Understand and accept personal accountability. Avoid shifting blame for uncivil behavioural choices. Intervene when it's the right thing to do.

If this condition is repeated in a sufficient number of related workplaces, such as health care institutions, entire professions can be culturally “tarred” as being uncivil.

The Impact Of Civility

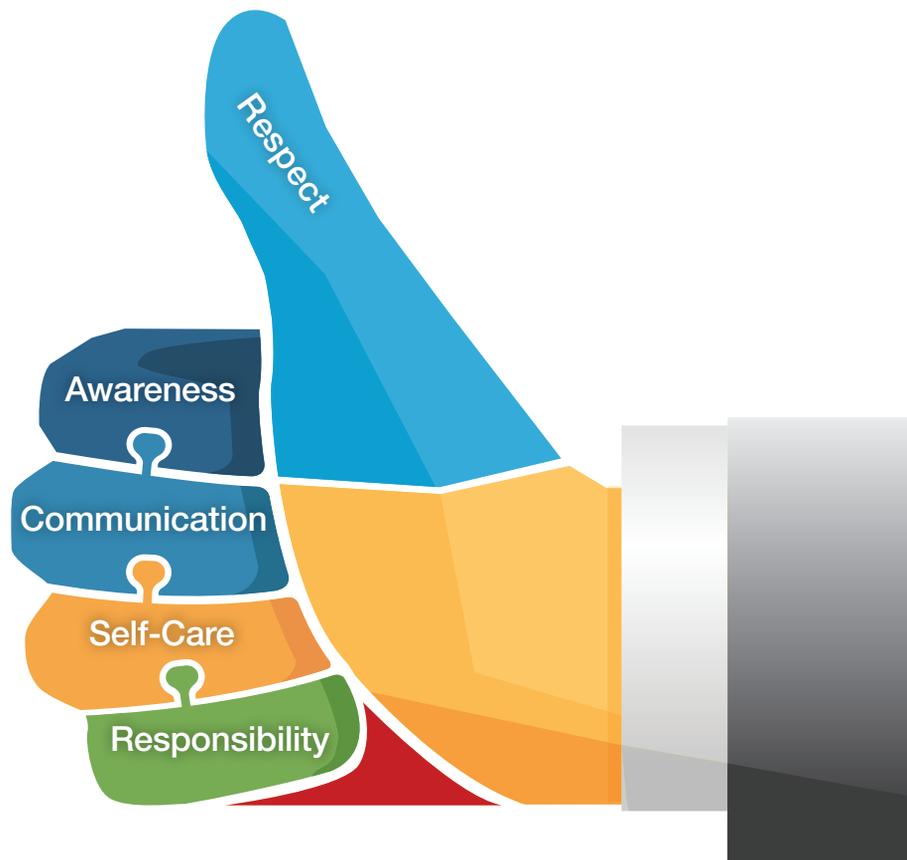
Leiter reminds us that positive social interactions allow the development of strong and effective connections to others, inspiring confidence in the group prospects. Civil interactions at work identify co-workers as supportive and helpful resources and are therefore associated with increased professional efficacy. Civility among colleagues is associated with lower rates of professional burnout. Civil collegial relationships foster inclusivity, co-operation, and can be energizing and empowering. It is much easier to enjoy one’s work in a civil environment.

One might argue that there is no need to discuss the benefits of civil behaviour in the workplace, or anywhere, for that matter. Everyone wants to be treated well. No one wants to feel hurt by an interaction with a friend, colleague or co-worker. We all appreciate a workplace that is comfortable and supportive. Yet, hundreds of doctors have been referred to the OMA Physician Health Program for help with workplace behaviour that has been uncivil, labelled as “disruptive.”

At a presentation for a community hospital about managing so-called “disruptive behaviour” in doctors, a surgeon spoke up saying that crude, off-colour jokes and other forms of commentary that might be seen as offensive by some were the norm in the operating room environment. He suggested that given the traditional OR culture, perhaps they ought to have their own, rather more permissive, code of conduct. All I could think to say in response was: “If we expect to treat one another well at Tim Hortons, is it OK to do otherwise in the OR?”

But the surgeon raised a good question: Is the medical culture different?

When I ask medical audiences if incivility is ever justified, often I hear opinions that it is. A frequent example is the doctor who is sharp with a co-worker in an urgent situation, perhaps in the OR, ICU or ER.



Again, questions must be asked: Is it ever necessary to adopt an uncivil approach to a colleague at work (e.g., swearing at a co-worker in a pressurized situation to get their attention)?

Are there ways to achieve a better clinical outcome, even in a tense situation, without resorting to incivility?

Should all doctors be expected to behave in a civil fashion all the time?

Is civility being sufficiently taught and modelled in medical training programs and beyond?

Embracing Civility

It appears, then, that a civil approach to relationships in the workplace has merit, but there are many questions to explore. While most doctors interact with others in a civil manner most of the time, anyone can experience lapses occasionally. And based upon referrals to the OMA Physician Workplace Support Program, it appears that some doctors lapse more often than others.

When the many dimensions of civility are considered more closely, it appears that there is much that can be learned about the causes of incivility and the strategies that can be adopted to foster civil behaviour, even at times of risk.

As such, I offer the following as Five Fundamentals of Civility for Physicians:

1. Respect Others and Yourself
2. Be Aware
3. Communicate Effectively
4. Take Good Care of Yourself
5. Be Responsible

Subsequent articles will examine each of these fundamentals in greater detail. ■

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References

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