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COMMENTARY | Editorials, letters, columns and other opinions

Workplace Civility Depends on Accountability


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Catherine Mattice


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Nicole Lucas

The police to forcibly remove a paid customer. **Uber** has a culture of sexual harassment. **Google** systematically underpays women. Currently 35 percent of the workforce reports feeling bullied at work, according to **CareerBuilder**.

Make an Honest Assessment

You might be thinking, "not at my company," but we implore you to look more closely. Unless you are willing to honestly assess your culture and put time and resources toward strengthening it, your business could end up on the cover of this very publication being scorned for bad decisions.

If you're thinking, "yeah right," take a look at the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971. Researcher **Philip Zimbardo** sought to understand if the situation outside of us — the institution — controls our behavior, or if our values and morality allow us to rise above a negative environment. He turned the basement of Stanford's psychology department into a mock prison and randomly selected research participants (Stanford students) to serve as prisoners or prison guards.

Zimbardo found the institution controls our behavior. Some of the guards became abusive. They lived up to the role they had been assigned. Most non-abusive guards went along with it; they never spoke up against the abusive

The world is a cruel place. For many, the workplace is, too. In fact, we are in a "civility crisis," according to **Weber Shandwick**, the firm that conducts a Civility in America Poll each year.

Harassment complaints to the **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** have gone up year after year. **United Airlines** asked

guards. Most prisoners went along with it too; only a few attempted to fight the institution and regain power.

In the same vein, it seems the HR team at Uber, who received and ignored reports of sexual harassment and discrimination, allowed the institution to control their behavior.

Even the law enforcement officers involved with United were caught up in the institution of travel. None of them spoke up and said to United, "No, I don't think I want to participate in forcibly removing a paying customer who has done nothing wrong. Let's consider other options." Instead, they did what made sense inside the institution in the moment.

Cultural Norms at Work

Your employees do bad things that make sense inside your institution, too. Organizational factors such as bureaucracy, strong hierarchy, high competition, high stress, change, many longtime employees, many highly intelligent employees, a machismo culture, and more, all allow bullying to thrive.

People naturally adapt to the cultural norms and standards within their organization. So it is imperative to diligently create and drive norms and standards through your mission, vision, and values statements. They have to be more than just words on your website. Then everyone has to have to live them. Daily.

Unfortunately, as consultants and partners to employers, we regularly see that managers often lack the ability to set expectations and hold people accountable to those values — because the organization failed to train the managers to do so. If there's bad behavior in your organization, it's due to a lack of focus on core values.

On the flip side, one sign of a thriving organization is that people are conscious of the greater mission and values, feel appreciated as individuals, and are comfortable expressing themselves (respectfully) regardless of their role or position. In such environments, integ-

rity, trust, and respect are highly valued and are clearly demonstrated in employee interactions.

Are your core values just words or are they actually guiding your culture? Are you empowering managers by giving them the training they need to build and sustain a positive work environment? Are you clearly articulating your support for a healthy and civil work environment and taking it seriously when employees express concern or unhappiness?

Ripple Effect on Community

It is your moral and ethical duty to our community. If you have a negative work environment, your employees are unhappy all day at work. They bring that unhappiness home to their families and into the community.

If you have a positive work environment, your employees are thriving, and they bring that home and into the community. The ripple effect of your work environment is real.

Go beyond the requisite harassment prevention training and invest in leadership, communication, and conflict resolution training. Give employees the tools they need to be better people.

As we continue to see in the news and perhaps even experience firsthand, there is a distinct need for training and educating employees, in addition to raising awareness about bullying and other forms of disrespect.

To the extent you advocate for a higher standard of civility and education among employees, you will find they are able to sustain a truly healthy and productive workplace. Giving your employees the opportunity to thrive is the greatest contribution you can make to society today — above your latest and greatest product or service.

Let's all raise the standards of how we treat each other, and we will have a more just, civil, and peaceful world.

Catherine Mattice is founder of Civility Partners, and Nicole Lucas is Marketing & PR Manager for the San Diego Employers Association.