

Workplace Rudeness: A New Pandemic?

By Neil Seeman

Smartphone addiction (Blackberry or iPhone) during meetings, showing up late for meetings, and a lack of “Thank-yous” are [infecting the workplace](#). Healthcare is no exception.

What can be done to reverse the trend? Equally important, is workplace rudeness a public health issue?

There are few legitimate excuses for everyday rudeness. Let’s forget about our intensely busy selves; the tough economy; or demanding clients or colleagues. We all know that the busiest people, under the most stressful of circumstances, can be the most polite and responsive in the simplest of ways.

Low-tech approaches could help turn the tide. First, my brother, a globe-trotting entrepreneur, has a tag line on his e-mails saying: “Apologies for the curtness of this e-mail; I’m typing with my thumbs.” Second, some industry associations now instruct members to respond to correspondence within 24 hours. This is eminently feasible – if you check e-mail even once a day (a policy I recommend for efficiency), and, if busy, say you’ll reply at a later date. Last, be tactful if using an out-of-office message. I’ve seen someone flare in their out-of-office subject line: “VACATION” – nothing more.

I asked a former hospital CEO how to get around the problem of email jail and general time crunch, and he advised, “Hire an EA.” “What’s that?” I asked (seriously). (It’s an Executive Assistant). But there may be a simpler, less expensive and more personal solution.

I think the social remedy to workplace rudeness is, paradoxically, to be more blunt.

1. Be blunt about being late for a meeting

Tai Huynh, a colleague of mine, tells me: “I personally dislike people arriving late to meetings. I think it’s rude, disrespectful to colleagues (especially if the late person is the organizer) and eats into valuable meeting time. For me, the rudeness clock starts ticking at about the 5 minute mark. At about 10 minutes, the disrespect factor kicks in and by about the 15 minute mark, I wonder why the person bothers showing up.”

I figure that toting up the costs to the health system of people being late for meetings – i.e., assessing the waste by reference to the total annual salary of attendees who agreed to come but were late – could save the system significant sums if we are transparent about these costs.

2. Be blunt about meeting unnecessarily

According to Glenn Parker and Robert Hoffman, authors of [Meeting Excellence](#), knowing the expense of meetings may be an impetus to make meetings more productive. I believe this could be especially powerful in the culture of health policy, where, to quote one globally renowned physician-researcher, the running ethos is to “to meet to plan to partner.” Better to make a decision to partner – or not – at the first meeting, and to start the partnership project (i.e., writing things down) at the first meeting. If you exceed two cancellation notices prior to landing at the first meeting, you know it’s not worth it.

Messrs. Parker and Hoffman point to a survey conducted at the Milwaukee Area Technical College that recorded the time that members of the college’s 130-person management council spent in meetings. The evaluators used salary as the basis to calculate how much this time was worth. Meetings reportedly cost the college more than \$3 million US per year.

I know managers who charge people money who are late for meetings. I personally don't like this approach. I have young children: I know just enough about psychology to suspect negative incentives generally don't work in this context. People just end up grouching at the boss. Besides, often times the reason for being late for the meeting is because you've had back-to-back meetings all day and the first one started late. After all the meetings conclude, I've been told by some very senior people in healthcare that the day's real work happens "off line" – whatever that means.

3. Be blunt about the use of smart-phones while meeting with someone

Personal digital assistants are another curse. So-called "intraviduals" (a term invented by author Dalton Conley in [Everywhere, USA](#)) are neither here nor there when tied to their Blackberry. A friend of mine, economist Patrick Luciani, calls this the "excuse-me-your-Highness-I-have-to-take-this-call" syndrome; even when speaking to the Queen, the other call is always more important.

I had the pleasure of speaking recently with a wise man who told me that, not long ago, it was the height of rudeness to take another call while speaking to another. Nowadays, it's the new normal.

"Of all of the standard irritants, uncontrolled BB use is the largest," writes Borys Chabursky. He tells me of an incident where two individuals came in to interview him for a project. "They asked a question and I would start answering and as I did, they would start checking their emails on their BBs. When I suddenly stopped speaking, they, without looking up said, 'it's ok, we're listening, just keep going.' I couldn't believe it and just stopped the interview."

We need leaders in healthcare to rebel against the culture of passive-aggressive behaviour, Blackberry addiction and meeting creep. Several years ago, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor psychologist [Lilia Cortina](#) found that 71% of workers had been mocked, taunted, ignored, or otherwise treated uncivilly by their coworkers and bosses. Last summer, researchers at West Chester University in Pennsylvania found that [75 percent](#) of workers are treated rudely by bosses or colleagues at least once a year. I could not find any comparable Canadian data. If you know of comparable data in healthcare, please [share](#).

4. Give incentives for good communication manners

When we talk about "a healthy workplace" in hospitals or care facilities, we often refer to policies and protocols that enforce existing health and safety legislation. Innovative initiatives like the [Healthy Healthcare Leadership Charter](#), created by the Quality Worklife-Quality Healthcare Collaborative (QWQHC), are making important strides forward to cultivate healthier healthcare workplaces.

Imagine if basic civility were the touchstone for a healthy workplace. That might go a long way to saving money, stopping burn-out, and promoting happiness at work – and at home.

5. Say "Thank You" more often

I invite you to express your gratitude and send a ["thank you"](#) note to someone who is making a difference to help put a stop to the incivility disorder in the workplace. Thank you for reading this.

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