

From the Editor-in-Chief

The Loss of Civility

Notwithstanding the extremes of violent uprisings, unspeakable acts of genocide or human beings' committing horrific crimes against one another, even relatively peaceful societies have witnessed an increasing incidence of behaviours that are an affront to civility. Hostilities among citizens may arise because of opposing religious and political ideologies, or in response to a desire for basic freedoms, such as the right to speak without fear of recrimination. Here in Canada, we have seen our share of political scandals, character bashing and outright dishonest behaviour among the country's elected leaders. One wonders whether bad behaviour is simply now a part of daily living that we have come to expect, and perhaps accept, as par for the course.

In recent weeks, the aftermath of tragic events such as the Lac-Mégantic train derailment and disasters wrought by Nature has united communities in mutual support through shared grief and loss. But must the impetus for civility arise only in times of tragedy, loss or disaster? We might think about day-to-day interactions with neighbours, co-workers or the nameless person on the bus or in the street who clearly could use assistance, where a simple "can I help you?" (or "good morning" or "excuse me" or "thank you") might go a long way to reveal and propagate our collective civility.

Although the adage that "actions speak louder than words" serves humankind well in the face of crises, there are many times when simple words can help us relate to others, particularly those with whom we work. Imagine a workplace in which everyone, regardless of position or title, is courteous and respectful towards all others. Years of personal experience and recent stories shared by colleagues confirm a pervasiveness of rude, disrespectful, mean, undermining and sometimes dishonest behaviour and communication in society, healthcare and nursing. Perhaps part of the problem is rooted in societal complacency and acceptance of the bad behaviour that surrounds us, but consider the possibility that such tolerance may be just an excuse for our own bad behaviour. To be "civil" may be defined

as being “polite” or “courteous.” Civility is the demonstration of a “polite action or expression” and further – as one’s mother might cite – the result of “good breeding” (see <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/civility>). Antonyms include such words as “rude” and “surly,” and we might consider the implications of self-identifying with other descriptors of this ilk (“brash,” “disrespectful,” “shameless,” “boorish,” “vulgar,” “inappropriate,” “indecent,” “thoughtless,” “arrogant,” “conceited,” etc.; see www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civility). Need more be said? How would you prefer to be described by your peers, employer or employees – polite? Courteous? Well bred – or ... ?

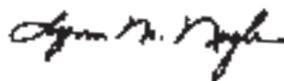
Much has been written about the importance of role-modelling, particularly for those in leadership positions. Unfortunately, too many leaders continue to manifest a “command and control” or “it’s my way or the highway” management style. As has been shown time and again, authoritarianism and tyranny do not constitute leadership, and these qualities are most certainly not inducements for civility. Sometimes bad behaviour is the result of organizational or professional hierarchies and demonstrations of superiority or power, but position should never afford one the right to be uncivil.

While a majority of organizations have established clear policies with remedies to address overt bullying and harassment, few have taken actions to create and imbue a culture of civility. No one expects expressions of undying love among fellow employees (though that’s not to say it has never happened). At a minimum, however, we must model respect, honesty and, when the situation warrants, forthrightness – but above all else, civility to others. This is particularly important towards those who look to us as exemplars of appropriate behaviour. I have witnessed irreparable damage to individuals and teams wrought by people whose bad behaviour is tolerated. This is not to suggest that we haven’t all had our moments, but most lapses can be remedied if dealt with in short order.

Although incivility is likely not a cause for dismissal, it is the thin edge of the wedge and does not bode well for good leadership or effective team functioning. It is my thesis that one person’s bad behaviour likely induces others to behave equally badly. And if that is true, it may be that one person’s demonstration of civil behaviour can lead to a shared code of civility among work groups and teams.

After conducting a random, albeit limited, search of academic and healthcare provider websites, I found that policies and initiatives related to the promotion of civility in the workplace are relatively common but occur predominantly within academic settings. A majority of those reviewed appear to have an official policy, guideline or statement of expectations regarding civility. But the search for comparable documents on the websites of provider organizations netted few finds.

As leaders, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that workplaces take an explicit stand on the issue of civility. More importantly, behaving badly oneself is nothing more than setting a bad example. So – please and thank you – think about how simple acts of civility may beget civility from others. As professionals, we are held to a higher standard of behaviour. And as leaders in a “caring” profession, accepting the loss of civility in the realm of our personal and professional lives is simply unacceptable.



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