

Viewpoint: It's time to reclaim civility for the workplace

By Richard J. Levin and Sara Miller-Paul for the Boston Business Journal
Originally published December 28, 2018

You can see it on the Mass Pike, the Expressway, and the T. In the workplace and at home. Everyone seems to be in our way, our impatience reaches a boiling point, and our annoyance with everything and everyone explodes in anger or frustration.

The holidays are typically rife with heightened emotion, but this year in particular the raw emotions of a polarized society are taking their toll on the workplace. As it is, work can be tiring, frustrating, emotionally vexing — and, yes, exhilarating and fulfilling. The same is true of the holidays. But neither work nor family should ever make us feel unsafe, powerless or fearful.

In order to feel more emotionally balanced in our personal lives, some of us choose to “unfollow” on social media people with whom we disagree. That can help. But at work, equivalent strategy, typically with less potential, is to avoid or disregard people who express points of view that are different from our own. It is time to ratchet down the rhetoric and create work cultures that are more tolerant, accepting, and kind.

During divisive times, even the smallest expressions of warmth, concern, and caring are welcome and appreciated. Perhaps you’d rather not call it “kindness” and would prefer “empathy” or “being considerate.” Whichever term you choose, civility woven into a business’s culture correlates with increased productivity, reduced attrition, and increased customer satisfaction, all of which not only make good business sense but serve as predictors of organizational health and employee satisfaction.

The times summon us, as business leaders, to lead by example, to reclaim civility as a fundamental attribute of the workplace, to create possibility and

humanity in the midst of increasing fear and uncertainty. We encourage leaders of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and political institutions to put respect over self-interest, to demonstrate steadfast, reassuring, unifying leadership during external and internal crises, and to be fully present for employees, their families, and the people they care about.

The beginning of a New Year is a catalyst to take the temperature of our workplaces, to assure they are spaces of safety, respect, dignity, and trust. If we haven't already, it is an opportune time to communicate to workers and managers that bullying, abuse, fear-mongering, and harassment are not acceptable behaviors in our workplaces, and won't be tolerated, ever.

Our job as business leaders is to produce value for our shareholders and stakeholders while simultaneously creating a code of civility and safety in which we treat, greet, and listen to each other with respect.

A core component of leadership is to recognize and address when harm is being done to our team members through practices that dominate, ignore, abuse, betray, and suppress the human spirit. Business leaders play a paramount role in supporting our workers, families, communities, and schools -- the core institutions of a civil society.

For 2019, we wish you the courage to be kind, and the strength to choose civility. Lead, by example.

Richard J. Levin is a longtime contributor to the Boston Business Journal and is one of the founders of executive coaching.

Sara Miller-Paul is managing director of Richard Levin & Associates, an executive coaching and leadership development firm based in Wellesley Hills.