Nurturing Mutual Respect: Civility Intervention in the Classroom

Abstract

The existence of civility in the classroom has been shown to improve dramatically the overall ambience among students, particularly the team atmosphere. This relationship is particularly important in higher education because students often report how much they loathe having to work collaboratively for a portion of their course grade. One aspect of this paper is to draw upon Social Exchange Theory to explain the relationship between civility and team atmosphere such that civil behaviors will produce reiterative reciprocation among students' interactions. We contribute to the current literature by advocating a civility intervention early in the semester during which students may tell personal stories about their experiences that will serve as an initiator of civil behavior within the classroom. During debriefing, pamphlets and a rubric explicating the civility intervention framework are handed out to all participants.

Keywords: Civility, Intervention, Interpersonal Behavior, Respect

Introduction

Pearson and colleagues define workplace civility as "behavior that helps to preserve the norms for mutual respect at work; it comprises behaviors that are fundamental to positively connecting with another, building relationships, and empathizing" (2000: 125). Similarly, in a civil classroom, students respect each other and care for classmates' well-being. In such an environment, students value each other (Osatuke, Moore, Ward, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009); rude behaviors are not tolerated (Pearson & Porath, 2005); and students may attempt to correct deviancies from the civil norms (Hackman, 1992).

Several management researchers provided evidence for the benefits of promoting a civil workplace. High climate of civility is related to decreased violent behavior (Ottinot, 2008). Civility is related to diminishing workplace cynicism (Nicholson, Leiter, & Laschinger, 2014), improving collegiality, establishing a positive spiral, and increasing employees' commitment to the workplace (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011). On the other hand, incivility is related to a number of negative outcomes such as employees' decrease in commitment to the team (Cunningham, Miner, & McDonald, 2013), decreased perceptions of distributive justice and job satisfaction (Blau & Andersson, 2005), and increase in individuals' psychological distress (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Research shows that racial dissimilarity is one of the factors that triggers uncivil behaviors (Cunningham et al, 2013).

Although the establishment of classroom norms, rules, and policies is central in the promotion of a civil environment (Anderson & Pearson, 1999), civility intervention can vastly improve students' experience of civility in the classroom (Leither et al, 2011). Civility interventions are intended to raise individuals' awareness about their interpersonal influence. As such, after participating in civility interventions, participants are expected to pay more attention

to the way others perceive their behaviors in various daily interactions (Osatuke et al, 2009). Lastly, we suggest that students' self-report and teammates' report of civil climate should be included in the evolution of team performance at the end of the semester.

Theoretical Foundation

We use Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) to suggest that students reciprocate their team's favorable treatment with positive attitudes and behavior. In line with SET, we suggest that students who work within a team in which they are treated with respect will reciprocate with being more committed to the team's performance and are more satisfied with their team.

Civility interventions can especially facilitate the interpersonal relationships among students in the classroom, particularly within their team, when students are first offered the opportunity to discuss their past experiences through a brief storytelling session. Students who participate in civility interventions are expected to experience lower tensions caused by personal differences. The positive atmosphere generated by such mutual respect and understanding can reinforce positive attitudes and behavior towards class and teammates.

Learning Objectives

At the end of the civility intervention, participants will be able to:

- Describe civility in the classroom.

- Describe how civil behaviors can improve their classroom and team experience.

- Describe how uncivil behaviors can impact their classroom and team performance.

- Defines norms for civil behaviors in the classroom and their team.

Exercise Overview

Civility interventions encompass a series of classroom activities and conversations with the purpose of raising students' mindfulness about the importance of promoting and maintaining a civil environment in the classroom. Such awareness will not only have positive impact on students' performance in the classroom but will also carry into their future workplace experience. Civility interventions will increase students' understanding of civil and uncivil behaviors and help them relate various positive outcomes associated with a civil climate. Furthermore, students will be required to commit to their norm of civility in their team throughout the semester. Through multiple conversations, students are encouraged to share different things about themselves with their team which promotes trust among the team members.

In this session, we discuss some activities as part of instructors' initiation to create a civil classroom environment. The purpose is to help students know their teammates better, initiate conversations about themselves, and share their diverse perspectives. As such, we first discuss the importance of establishing a civil classroom, ask participants to share their experiences of uncivil behaviors in their workplace, and discuss various contexts in which instructors can include civility interventions in the classroom. We show two short videos exemplifying one civil and one uncivil act, debrief the videos, and facilitate group discussions.

As part of civility interventions, we suggest using Communication Style Inventory (Developed by the VHA National Center for Organization Development) in the classroom. By taking this survey, students will learn how they usually act in everyday work circumstances and share their findings with others in the team. An example item in the survey is "I'm usually open to getting to know people personally and establishing relationships with them" vs "I'm not usually open to getting to know people personally and establishing relationships with them".

This survey can be a very useful tool to help students get to know themselves and each other better. Lastly, we suggest measuring students' perception of civility in their team at least two times during the semester to ensure that civility interventions are working.

Session Description

Total time requested: 60 minutes allocated as follows:

- Introductions: 5 minutes
  - After a brief introduction of the presenters, participants will be asked to introduce themselves.

- Communication Style Inventory: 5 min

  - Participants will be handed the Communication Style Inventory. They will have time to fill the survey and discuss their opinions about the results of the survey.

- Introductory video of uncivil behavior followed by a debrief: 5 min

- Brief group discussion: 10 min

  - Participants are asked to share their thoughts about the video and share their own examples of an uncivil act.

- An activity: Has Incivility Impacted me? 5 min

  - Participants will be handed a form where they check off a list of uncivil behaviors that they have engaged in the past. Participants will not be asked to turn this in.

- Discussion: 10 min

  - The negative outcomes associated with uncivil behavior will be discussed.

- Play a video of a civil behavior following by a debrief: 5 min

- Overview of classroom civility: 10 min

- o Presenters will discuss various approaches to promote civility in the classroom, ask participants about their input, and finally discuss civility interventions as a useful approach.
- Post intervention survey: 5 min
  - o Participants will be handed the post intervention survey. The purpose of this survey is to measure students' perception of civility in their team after participating in the civility interventions.

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Appendix A

Veterans' Health Administration Civility Scale adjusted to a classroom

Items will be rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Q1 (Respect): Students treat each other with respect in my team.

Q2 (Cooperation): A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my team.

Q3 (Conflict Resolution): Disputes or conflicts are resolved fairly in my team.

Q4 (Coworker Personal Interest): The people I work with take a personal interest in me.

Q5 (Coworker Reliability): The people I work with can be relied on when I need help.

Q6 (Antidiscrimination): This team does not tolerate discrimination.

Q7 (Value Differences): Differences among individuals are respected and valued in my team.

Q8 (Supervisor Diversity Acceptance): Our team leader work well with teammates with different backgrounds.