

This is one of a series of occasional papers by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y

1. Courtesy, Politeness; 2. A Polite Action or Expression

FOREWARD

There is much that is deeply troubling to all of us these days: the worst economic crisis in decades, two overseas wars, the continuing threat of terrorism, a dangerously unstable Middle East, and much more.

But another unsettling development is the appalling lack of fundamental civility and simple courtesy in our time. Angry people are striking out in every area of life. One writer labeled ours “the age of rage”—road rage, workplace rage, Internet rage, airplane rage, political rage, national rage.

Rude, arrogant public displays are everywhere. The rules of fair play are ignored.

The decline of civility is starting to take its toll.

So, at this moment, please consider the following points—which have been shared through the ages and which we believe are even more timely and relevant today.

We hope you find these thoughts helpful and would appreciate hearing from you about any ideas you might have on this important issue.

Robert L. Dilenschneider
Chairman and Founder

WHO'S RIGHT?

Civility, at its core, means respecting the other person's point of view, no matter how wide of the mark, bizarre, or even ignorant you may think it is.

You will rarely, if ever, convince adversaries to see things your way or moderate their position if you express contempt, disdain, or ridicule for an opposing point of view. That approach may score debating points, but it won't make a convert.

Don't question motives—discuss policies.

Listen—ask questions.

Too many, today, take their cues from a polarizing, attack-oriented political culture.

Help your adversaries understand they are as reasonable, thoughtful, and perhaps as smart as you are, but just simply off-base on a particular issue, whatever it may be. You might even change a few minds in the process. “My way or the highway” has never been the best way to win friends and influence people.

Hard as it may be, use responses such as “I understand why you hold that position...There may be merit in what you say...I respect your beliefs...Let's discuss an alternative.” You get the idea.

DID I SAY THAT?

No matter how balanced you may be, recognize that these are unsettling times. Tensions are high. Tempers can flare. People are edgy, anxious, confused, frustrated, and frightened. Some are downright nasty.

At a business meeting or in a one-on-one encounter, persons you have held in high regard for a long time as associates or friends, stressed out and under great pressure, may say, or do, things totally out of character. Let them be; let them sound off.

We all stumble now and then, doing and saying what we may later regret. Keep that in mind. Don't retaliate if insulted. Don't over-react. If you strike back you will probably exacerbate an already tense situation. If insulted or abused, "turn the other cheek" and recognize that in time people generally realize the error of their ways.

T RUE DIVERSITY

A hallmark of civility is respect for diversity and difference in the workplace, in the executive suite, in the boardroom and in society generally.

This applies to such basic human demarcations as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and ethnicity. Genuine inclusion is a goal we must all aspire to.

Recall the late Brooklyn Dodger shortstop Pee Wee Reese, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1947, when Jackie Robinson was introduced in Ebbets Field as the first African-American in the major leagues, he was met with boos and catcalls. Reese ran from the dugout to stand with his teammate. This story has been one for the ages.

Some still give lip service to that ideal and harbor, and occasionally express, subtle, and not-so-subtle, prejudices.

True civility demands that we try to rise above this, help others understand the importance of respect, and recognize our common humanity.

EMPATHY—IT'S GOOD FOR YOU!

Empathy—“the ability to share in another’s emotions, thoughts, or feelings”—is the single quality that assures one will act towards others with civility.

In the classic “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Atticus Finch teaches his daughter, Scout, to be sure she sees things from the point of view of others.

Tectonic shifts are battering the financial landscape. People are deeply troubled, uprooted, and confused in these parlous times. To some, the world seems to be spinning out of control. Jobs lost, dreams deferred, 401Ks and 529s decimated, fortunes disappearing, leaders failing, old beliefs imploding, the future uncertain.

Even those on top may suddenly find themselves holding on for dear life and not quite understanding what to do...but unable or unwilling to address it.

If you sense that someone wants to talk—listen! Lend a sympathetic ear to those who have been dealt a bad hand by circumstances often beyond their control. Speak a kind word. Offer reassurance. Make a thoughtful gesture. Show that you care. Offer an idea if you can. You’ll feel better about that person—and yourself—if you do. Generosity of spirit, sooner or later, will be rewarded.

THE ART OF NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is, willingly or not, something we all do in life all the time, but too often not very well or skillfully. It undergirds modern civil society and a working civilization. Whether in the business arena, the public square, or one’s personal life, differences are real—frequently serious. They have to be sorted

out and compromised. Cavemen instinctively settled disputes violently. One hopes we have come a long way since. On the larger world stage, we call this diplomacy.

The objective always is the promotion of harmony and agreement to avoid the alternative of harsher, more drastic responses. Adopting a positive, solution-driven approach to resolving conflicts represents a good start. In fact, the ability to negotiate successfully is something of an art, which can be taught and learned. Small wonder, then, that dozens of “how-to” books have been published on the subject and that seminars and courses on skillful negotiating are readily available. It behooves any leader, or aspiring leader, to sharpen his, or her, negotiating talents using whatever mode and means is most accessible.

T RUST—CONFIDENTIAL AND P E R S O N A L

Civility demands mutual trust as well as respect. A key to this, especially in today’s digital era—where so much information is out there and easily available—is to honor another’s privacy.

I N THE WORKPLACE

Workplace rules have been relaxed considerably, but a sloppy, careless, too casual and informal approach often provides a context conducive to incivility. Foul language, now used openly by both sexes, is offensive to many and is inappropriate in the workplace. One can make a hard point even tougher with proper language and add to a climate of civility at the same time. Try it. You’ll like the result. It’s not old-fashioned to emphasize courtesy, thoughtfulness, simple good manners, and decorum in the workplace.

Such behavior will lead to a more profound civil experience.

TAKE A BREAK

It's almost certain that someone will seriously insult you in the next few days. It will be unfair. You may feel hurt.

The immediate reaction of all of us is to respond.

Don't do it.

The late President Kennedy used to say, "Don't get angry, get even." We sure agree with the first part of the Kennedy statement.

With respect to JFK's second point, take a break—a few hours, or maybe even a day—and think about what happened and why it occurred. Chances are you will just forget it and move on.

But if the insult does deserve a response, the time you take to consider it will be well spent and enable you to formulate a constructive way to resolve or mitigate the indignity.

TRENDY AND TOXIC

"Snark" is a new and trendy term that defines a tone of teasing, snide, subtle abuse, nasty and knowing, that is just unnecessary. "Snark" attempts to annihilate someone's reputation. "Snarkers" like to think they are witty, but mostly they are exposing the seethe and snarl of an unhappy moment, releasing savage gossip, bad feeling, and forced laughter. Indeed, some feel the lowest, most insinuating and insulting side, wins the day.

When you meet a "snarker" be silent or just say "Is it that bad?" to dismiss the offender. And then follow with a positive discussion. Left unaddressed, "snarkers" will continue to destabilize life.

TECHNOLOGY IS GREAT, BUT...

Improper use of constantly advancing technology is partly to blame for incivility. The ubiquitous cellphone, however useful and practical, has its downside. Telephone calls and messages are routinely ignored. Thoughtless individuals carry on loud, annoying conversations in public places. Automated teller machines, telephone prompt systems, where an actual human being is never to be heard, and the like are all cost-efficient, but they do not do much to humanize daily life. E-mail, though invaluable, goes unanswered and can be dehumanizing. We've all read about employees learning they no longer had a job via an e-mail. People collect hundreds of so-called "friends" on social networking sites, but only if one employs a very broad definition of friendship.

We are all connected these days, but prudence and respect for others when using the latest breakthrough communications device is something you will never regret.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Before anyone starts ventilating, urge them to take a few minutes to think and recognize how fortunate they are compared with others in the world. We still live in a free country, enjoy economic security, and experience many pleasures others do not.

Yes, times are tough, but this writer still gets up every morning and counts his blessings. You might too.

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