



Positive Leadership

Chapter 2: Civility and respect

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“Never take a person’s dignity: it is worth everything to them, and nothing to you.”

– Stephen R. Covey

An Introduction to Civility and Respect

Based on their groundbreaking research, Drs. Christine Pearson and Christine Porath defined incivility as “[t]he exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct.” In my view, the two most important words in their definition are “seemingly inconsequential.”

Although many examples of disrespectful behaviours may not seem particularly egregious, their perceived insignificance make them an even larger threat to personal well-being and organizational culture, as these actions may be normalized or understood as acceptable conduct. They may also be more easily dismissed as “not a big deal,” which can prolong and intensify their negative effects.

So, what does disrespectful behaviour look like? Since the publication of my previous paper for APEX in 2016, I have worked with over 65 federal public service departments, agencies, and crown corporations and discussed how to build a positive and respectful workplace. Here are the most frequently cited examples of disrespectful behaviour I hear when I survey audiences on this question:

- Talking behind someone’s back/gossiping
- Making demeaning remarks, being sarcastic, or using a condescending tone
- Ignoring an expressed opinion in an email or in a live meeting
- Taking credit for someone else’s work or ideas
- Blaming others rather than accepting responsibility
- Multitasking during a meeting (e.g., checking email or texting messages)
- Not expressing appreciation for work (e.g., not saying “please” or “thank you”)
- Interrupting or talking over someone else
- Engaging in passive-aggressive behaviours

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a hybrid work environment created additional challenges. As I continued to work with departments, I noticed additional forms of disrespectful behaviours, related to hybrid work. The most cited forms are:

- Always having cameras off in meetings

- Using email or text to discuss sensitive information or provide feedback
- Not opening or closing electronic communication with a greeting

The Costs of Disrespectful Behaviour

Considerable research highlights the perils of disrespectful behaviour in the workplace. These include:

1. Decreased levels of performance

Approximately two-thirds of employees' report that their performance declined due to experiencing disrespectful behaviour. Almost half (48%) lowered their work effort while 38% reported intentionally decreasing their work quality¹.

A separate eye-opening study from badbossology.com revealed that most employees spend 10 or more hours of work time per month either complaining, or listening to others complain, about their supervisors. Even more disconcerting, almost one-third spend twenty hours or more per month engaged in this activity.

2. Lower innovation

Innovation is a top priority in the federal public service., The Prime Minister's 2025 Mandate Letter directs public servants to bring new ideas and a clear focus, while the Clerk directs them to focus and simplify their work. The advent of artificial intelligence and other technological breakthroughs only amplifies the importance of innovation.

Positive leadership is a crucial tool to respond to the call for innovation, and indeed, studies show how it is negatively impacted by disrespectful behaviours. In a brilliant series of studies², participants were treated rudely by a "stranger" (a member of the research team) on their way to the experiment. In another trial, recruits observed a fellow "participant" (once again, a member of the team) being berated for being late to the study. In both studies, creativity declined in several notable ways. First, participants who were directly or indirectly exposed to disrespectful behaviour came up with significantly fewer ideas when compared to participants who did not have this experience.

The quality of the ideas was also negatively affected. Participants who experienced or witnessed disrespectful behaviours came up with ideas that were rated significantly less creative by external evaluators. For instance, when asked to identify possible uses for a brick, participants in the disrespectful condition suggested "building a house" or "building a wall." Those who were not exposed to disrespectful behaviour came up with much more novel ideas, such as "using it as a goalpost for a street soccer game" or "painting it and giving it as a gift." Together, these results show the important impacts of disrespectful behaviour on innovation.

3. Less cooperation and collaboration

¹ Pearson, Christine, and Porath, Christine (2015). *The Price of Incivility*, Harvard Business Review.

² Porath, Christine L. and Amir Erez (2007). Does Rudeness Really Matter? The Effects of Rudeness on Task Performance and Helpfulness, *Academy of Management Journal* 50, no 5, 1181-197, doi:10.5465/amj.2007.20159919.

In a striking study with medical teams, researchers discovered that rudeness functions as a “social threat,” triggering defensive responses in team members. This causes individuals to become less prosocial and more selfish. Specifically, teams exposed to rudeness showed reduced information and workload sharing, which are two critical components of team performance. In medical settings, this translated to poorer execution of lifesaving procedures. Lives were literally on the line as a result.

4. Poorer physical health

One provocative British study examined the impact of a negative versus positive supervisory style on the blood pressure readings of employees³. On alternate days, employees worked either with a manager with whom they had a positive relationship, or one with whom they had a negative relationship. Results revealed that blood pressure significantly spiked when employees worked with the “bad boss.”

In another study conducted over a 15-year period, researchers examined the link between working for a “bad boss” and the risk of coronary problems. Even after controlling for major risk factors such as perceived workload, activity level, education, social class, income, and supervisory status, employees who had a difficult relationship with their boss were significantly more likely to develop coronary heart disease or suffer a heart attack.

Practical Strategies to Build a Respectful Workplace

Given the varied and profound costs of disrespectful behaviours, what can executives do to build a more positive and respectful workplace? Here are some powerful activities:

1. Be the change you wish to see in the world

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy famously stated, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself⁴.” The idea that the disrespectful behaviour of senior leaders can and does encourage the expression of similar behaviors in their direct reports has been strongly supported.

One thought-provoking study showed that one-quarter of managers admitted to acting disrespectfully towards others because their own supervisors treated them in a similar manner⁵. In another set of three independent studies, researchers discovered evidence supporting a trickle-down model of abusive supervision. As the name suggests, inappropriate behaviour from higher levels cascaded down the organization⁶. Given these findings, the power of being a positive role model cannot be understated.

³ Wager, N. (2003). The Effect on Ambulatory Blood Pressure of Working under Favourably and Unfavourably Perceived Supervisors, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 60, n° 7, 468-74, doi:10.1136/oem.60.7.468.

⁴ Bryan, Mark A., Julia Cameron and Catherine A. Allen (1999). *The Artist's Way at Work: Riding the Dragon*, William Morrow.

⁵ Pearson, Christine and Porath, Christine (2015). *The Price of Incivility*, Harvard Business Review.

⁶ MAWRITZ, M.B., MAYER, D.M., HOOBLER, J.M., WAYNE, S.J. and MARINOVA, S.V. (2012). [A trickle down model of abusive supervision](#).

2. Take time to foster human connection (in a hybrid world)

It is more important than ever to bring more intention to our relationships at work and at home. Considerable data shows elevated levels of anxiety and uncertainty. As the public service continues to evolve its approach (e.g., hybrid, artificial intelligence, etc.), it will be important to recognize that the role of the executive will be to adopt an approach where all employees feel connected and included. In my conversations with leaders across numerous departments and agencies, I have gathered several strategies public sector executives can model and encourage to support a sense of human connection.

- **Be mindful of remote and online attendees**

“Out of sight, out of mind” is a powerful quote that applies to the reality of virtual meetings. Federal public service executives must remember the challenges of joining meetings remotely, especially when some people are in the office.

At the same time, extensive research by Stanford professor Nick Bloom – a globally recognized expert who has researched remote work for two decades and is LinkedIn’s top voice in the area – highlights how mixed-mode methods of operation lead to increased feelings of anxiety and exclusion when hybrid meetings occur. Based on hundreds of conversations with his clients, Professor Bloom discovered that no matter how the meetings are constructed, [people joining remotely will likely feel less connected with their colleagues who are in the same physical location](#) (e.g., watching their colleagues whisper or laugh on camera without knowing the full context; knowing that their colleagues can meet and further discuss any issues following the video meeting in person). The risk for elevated feelings of anxiety and exclusion will likely correlate with the seriousness of the tone or topic of conversation.

There is evidence from the federal public service corroborating the challenges of hybrid meetings. The most recent Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) revealed that 29% of participants indicated that team members participating in meetings online would feel less included than those who are participating in person⁷.

Given these findings, executives will benefit from, at a minimum, taking time to discuss how to maximize engagement for attendees participating online. Ideally, executives may want to consider holding team meetings when most or all employees are in the office and ensuring active participation for those joining online. This maximizes engagement and avoids the inevitable complications and challenges of holding a hybrid meeting.

Executives should also consider acknowledging the challenges and opportunities of hybrid work when hosting an online meeting. Brainstorm ideas around how to ensure that everyone feels connected. Watch out that some individuals do not dominate the conversation.

- **Make time for “small talk”**

⁷ Treasury Board Secretariat, Government of Canada (2024), [Public Service Employee Survey: Highlights](#).

One of the major criticisms I hear about meetings (especially those online) is that attendees tend to jump immediately into the agenda before connecting with their colleagues on a personal level.

Prevailing evidence suggests that small talk has beneficial effects. In one pre-pandemic study, researchers discovered that “[o]n days workers made more small talk than usual, they experienced more positive emotions and were less burned out. They were also more willing to go out of their way to help their colleagues.”

While results also found that small talk is distracting “... the positives of small talk outweighed the negatives and that those negatives could be managed.” The authors concluded that it is important to ensure small talk carries over into virtual meetings.

A separate independent study also discovered that making time for small talk in online meetings enhanced enjoyment and raised the likelihood of continual conversation in the future. Given the profound concerns around loneliness and employee disengagement, being more intentional about creating space for casual conversation is vitally important.

- **Cameras on in meetings**

As noted above, in my extensive consulting work across departments, when I ask audiences for examples of disrespectful behaviour, “colleagues having cameras off during meetings” often tops the list.

Multiple reasons are noted for this negative reaction to a black screen. For starters, people assume individuals with their cameras off are not paying attention, slacking off, and/or doing other work (otherwise, why would they need their camera off?).

In addition to the above qualitative research, scientific evidence also outlines multiple benefits. In one study looking at video conversations⁸, participants retained more of the information from the call when there was more eye contact involved.

It’s worth noting that you do not need constant eye contact to obtain these benefits. The researchers discovered that a direct gaze for 30% of the interaction was sufficient for participants to significantly increase what they remembered from the call.

Other research⁹ has uncovered how making eye contact enhances our communication and empathy, which is an essential element of building interpersonal trust and deeper understanding. Given the essential role of collaboration in the majority of work across the federal public service, maximizing time with cameras on elevates our effectiveness and efficiency.

One final caveat. This does not mean that cameras must be on at all times. However, what the above research suggests is that executives would be wise to prioritize video engagement for attendees as much as possible when it comes to hybrid meetings. This will ensure maximum value and connection is obtained.

⁸ Fullwood, Chris and Doherty-Sneddon, Gwennyth (2005). Effect of gazing at the camera during a video link on recall, ScienceDirect.

⁹ Perry, Melissa J. (2024). The Lost Art of Eye Contact in the Digital Age, College of Public Health.

If executives are concerned about the pushback, referencing the available research makes a clear case for this practice. Also, when warranted, individuals can ask permission to turn off their cameras. This ensures that “cameras on” is the norm rather than the exception. It creates an important and evidence-based standard for performance that benefits everyone involved.

3. Create or update a team charter

Even when people are highly motivated to treat each other with respect, considerable variation may exist in terms of their level of understanding about what this word means in practice.

In one compelling study, researchers were interested to determine how people interpret probabilistic words such as “often” and “possibly.” When participants were asked the likelihood of an event with a “real possibility” of happening, they provided a very broad range (anywhere from 20-80% likely that it would occur). Perhaps even more striking, some people did not agree that “always” means “100% of the time¹⁰.” With such wide interpretations of seemingly obvious words like “always,” are we surprised that there is considerable variation in more ambiguous words like “respect?”

Team Charters represent a series of behavioural commitments that team members make to one another in terms of how they approach working together. As the global pandemic fundamentally shifted where and how we work and as we shift back to in-office presence, taking time to align team members on these evolving dynamics is vitally important. Without this type of clarification, people will “make up their own rules,” which align with their own preferences. Failing to explicitly define shared ways of working creates the potential for conflict.

When identifying these behaviours, ensure that they are as specific as possible. As opposed to “be professional in meetings,” use “start and end meetings on time,” “show up on time,” or “have a meeting agenda.” A stranger should be able to walk in off the street and observe a team interaction and reliably score the extent to which the team members are honouring their Charter.

Teams could discuss the rules of engagement, with shared expectations itemized and distributed amongst the group. Team members would publicly commit to upholding these commitments and also discuss what happens if someone steps outside of the Team Charter. Although this may seem elementary, clarity is one of the driving forces of performance and accountability.

One of the major advantages I hear from executives who create a Team Charter is that it empowers employees to hold each other accountable. For example, if a group agrees that checking messages or cellphones is not acceptable during team meetings, the next time it happens, team members feel more comfortable reminding the person about their mutual agreement. When this is the case, rather than the reminder being a punitive act, it is more about protecting the core values of the group.

4. Be mindful of the medium when communicating

¹⁰ Mauboussin, Andrew and Michael J. Mauboussin (2018). [If You Say Something Is "Likely" How Likely Do People Think It Is?](#) Harvard Business Review.

As the world has evolved, we have also evolved numerous modes of communicating with one another. Communicating face-to-face, over the telephone, via texting, and email are all at our disposal.

Unfortunately, we often revert to email or texting due to its perceived efficiency. While there is little doubt that it is the quickest method of communication on the surface, the challenges inherent in electronic communication make it a problematic choice in many circumstances.

Not surprisingly, disrespectful behaviour is especially pronounced and rampant in electronic communication. Labeled the “online disinhibition effect,” this refers to the phenomenon that people tend to say and do things online that they would not do in person¹¹.



Research has shown that disrespectful behaviors that occur through electronic communications exact the same toll as those delivered in person.

In one study, participants were asked to complete a series of problem-solving tasks where the instructions and feedback were transmitted solely via email¹². At different times, the supervisor would communicate in either a supportive manner (e.g. “I really appreciate your efforts on these tasks.”) or in an uncivil manner (e.g. “Try these next tasks, genius.”).

Unsupportive supervisory comments prompted significantly lower levels of energy and higher levels of negative affect when compared to supportive supervisory comments. Disrespectful interactions also contributed to significant declines in both performance and engagement.

Other research shows that executives would be wise to match the complexity of the message being communicated with the medium used to communicate it.

Mindfully match message and medium

Message	Medium
Information sharing: one-way exchanges of information where a response may not be needed or expected.	Email or text message.
Complex communication: interactions that benefit from the presence of meaningful cues such as tone of voice and body language. Examples include delivering feedback, project planning, or navigating conflict.	A scheduled face-to-face meeting or video conference. A phone call may work, at a minimum.

¹¹ Nguyen, Melanie and Andrew J. Campbell (2008). Online Disinhibition Effect: Identity, Temporality, and Visual Cues, *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, n°. 7, 321-26, doi:10.1037/e504592008-001.

¹² Gary W. Giumetti et al (2013). What a Rude E-mail! Examining the Differential Effects of Incivility versus Support on Mood, Energy, Engagement, and Performance in an Online Context », *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 18, n°. 3, 297-309, doi:10.1037/a0032851.

Compelling research suggests that negotiations over email are at high risk for misunderstanding for several reasons. First and foremost, emotion and tone are difficult to convey accurately. Moreover, we tend not to consider the other side's perspective when writing our arguments or perspective to them.

What makes this even more challenging is that the person writing the email is usually largely unaware of their limitations. In one intriguing study, individuals were asked to communicate a series of statements with either a friend or a stranger via email, over the phone, or face-to-face¹³. The sender was asked to convey sarcasm, seriousness, anger, or sadness in their messages. The results were fascinating.

While the senders seriously overestimated how accurately the recipients would decipher the tone and intent of the message (whether or not the recipient was a friend or a stranger), the deficit was most problematic with email. Given the preponderance of email, executives will benefit from being selective when it comes to the medium they use to communicate their key messages.

A mantra I share with my clients is:

“ The complexity of the message must be met with the complexity of the medium used to communicate it. ”

5. Take immediate action when warranted

Disrespectful behaviours can emerge quickly and without warning, creating a critical decision point that leaders need to respond to in the moment. In many cases, they can miss this opportunity and “move on,” hoping that ignoring the incident will make it go away and that it will eventually be forgotten.

Without an immediate response, however, the credibility of the leader and the broader organization will likely be seriously questioned, as inaction sends the (perhaps) unintended message that this behaviour is tolerable and even acceptable. Additionally, the longer we wait to respond, the less precise both parties' recollections of the incident will be¹⁴.

There is tremendous pressure on individuals to not report incidents of incivility, not the least of which is the fear of retaliation or potentially suffering serious career setbacks. Additional research suggests that when employees report negative behaviors to their supervisors, only 18% of leaders take positive

¹³ Kruger, Justin et al (2005). [Egocentrism over e-mail: can we communicate as well as we think?](#), PubMed.

¹⁴ Kulik, James A. and Chen-Lin C. Kulik (1988). Timing of Feedback and Verbal Learning, Review of Educational Research 58, n° 1, 79, doi:10.2307/1170349

steps to address it. More commonly, the supervisor does nothing (40%) or their actions make the situation worse (42%)¹⁵.

Successfully navigating these complex and powerful moments is a major challenge for even the most trained and experienced executive. In cases where someone demonstrates the courage to openly express personal feelings and observations, it is crucial that the exchange take place in an emotionally supportive environment. For example, leaders can ask “What would you like to do in this situation?” and open up the conversation to collective problem solving.

With one large department I worked with, I created a survey that asked employees to rank the most important thing leaders in their organization could do to create a positive and respectful workplace. Taking immediate action was the top recommendation by far, appearing twice as often as the next most repeated behaviour.

Respect: The Leadership Standard that Sets the Tone

Respect is not a soft skill – it is a leadership standard. As executives, the ripple effects of our behaviour are magnified. How we listen, how we acknowledge, and how we respond sets the tone for our teams and, by extension, the broader culture. The data is clear: small acts of disrespect create outsized consequences: diminished performance, lower engagement, and eroded trust. But the good news is just as clear.



Key takeaway: When leaders model civility and act swiftly to uphold standards of respect, it signals safety, stability, and shared accountability.

In today’s hybrid world, where connection is fragile and misunderstandings are easy to come by, your presence – how you show up in every interaction – matters more than ever.



Key takeaway: Respect, consistently demonstrated, becomes the **foundation** on which trust, collaboration, and public service excellence are built.

For more resources on Positive Leadership, access the full [APEX Positive Leadership Toolkit](#).

¹⁵ Namie, Gary and Ruth Namie (2009). The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job, Sourcebooks.