

Testing Educational Intervention as a Strategy for Addressing Workplace Incivility

Madalyn Drew

Andrea Quenette, Editor

Abstract

Many business leaders and scholars agree that effective communication among employees is instrumental to an organization's success. Unfortunately, workplace incivility is a widespread problem in many organizations. Many researchers have identified workplace incivility as an antecedent to employee turnover intentions which is considered to be an immediate predictor of actual turnover. Business leaders and scholars have both spent considerable time and resources outlining the negative outcomes of workplace incivility and employee turnover; however, there is little research about the effectiveness of specific strategies to address workplace incivility as part of an employee retention plan. Included in this paper is a study that tests the effectiveness of educational intervention as a specific strategy to decrease the occurrence of incivility in working-age adults. Findings from the study suggest that when executed properly, teaching adults how to engage in more effective communication in the face of interpersonal differences can have a meaningful impact on the occurrence of incivility.

Keywords

civility, incivility, workplace, turnover, effective communications, workplace incivility, organizational culture, educational intervention, communication styles, written communication, non-verbal communication

Introduction

Many industries are experiencing a sudden and significant inability to retain staff, especially in the health sector (Gallow, 2021). Research on staff retention issues has produced compelling evidence that turnover intention is an immediate antecedent to real turnover behavior, which can have significant financial consequences for organizations (Namin et al., 2021). Additionally, “being the target or victim of uncivil behavior in the workplace is directly related to turnover intentions” (Namin et al., 2021, p. 3). However, these turnover intentions are influenced by both the organizational culture and workplace incivility (Evans, 2017). One could argue that for many companies, a failure to address workplace incivility is directly impacting their ability to retain staff.

The literature review included below explores the causes and consequences of workplace incivility, including the effects on staff retention. Following the literature review is a primary research study that tests effective interpersonal communication training as a potential antidote to incivility in working-age adults. The goal of the study and this paper is to determine if educational intervention could be an effective method for decreasing workplace incivility and, by extension, increasing employee satisfaction and retention rates.

Literature Review

Workplace Incivility as a Barrier to Effective Communication

It is a common notion amongst some of the world’s greatest business leaders that human resources are every organization’s greatest asset. As one leader, Richard Branson, put it, “if you take care of your employees, they [will] take care of your business” (Gallow, 2021, p. 1). Some scholars, like those who lean into Robert McPhee’s communicative constitution of organizations theory, would argue that companies only exist in their current form because of the interpersonal communication that happens between its organizational members (Griffin et al., 2018). In other words, people create an organization, and communication calls an organization into being (Griffin et al., 2018).

Effective communication among members of an organization is an instrumental part of organizational success because it “is essential to completing most everyday tasks, maintaining social relationships, and promoting information exchange” (Nelson, 2016, p. 1). Although the precise definition of communication changes depending on the circumstances in which it is being considered, scholars broadly consider it to be a process in which information is transmitted between two or more parties (Wienclaw, 2021). Typically, people think of communication as a verbal process; however, communication scholars have identified several other written and non-verbal communication channels that can transmit information between communicators (Wienclaw, 2021). Substantial communication and business research has examined the ways in which information is transmitted through various channels in order to explain any potential barriers to the free exchange of ideas, emotions, and information (effective communication).

However, incivility, especially in the workplace, is considered by many to be a major barrier to healthy interpersonal interactions (Nelson, 2016). Some scholars have gone as far as to describe workplace incivility as “a form of destructive communication” that degrades trust and inhibits the forging of “a respectful, collaborative, and productive workplace where employees can thrive” (Nelson, 2016, p. 2). One article published by the Global Institute for Research & Education pointed out that “when administrators in an organization are unable to create an environment which promotes open and clear communication, it can have negative repercussions on the work culture and the employee productivity” (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014, p. 209).

Workplace incivility is a concept that was first proposed in 1964 by Daniel Katz and was given a formal definition by Lynne M. Andersson and Christine M. Pearson in 1999 (Guo et al., 2020). It is commonly defined as “low-intensity deviant (rude, discourteous) behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 456). Some estimates suggest that nearly everyone, or about 98% of workers, has experienced incivil-

ity at some point in their working lives (Han et al., 2020). According to Namin et al., half of all workers experience workplace incivility at least once a week (2021). Han et al. theorized that these frequency data are partially an artifact of the mild criteria used to define what is considered to be workplace incivility; nevertheless, research suggests that “the insidious nature of incivility wreaks havoc on employees and workplaces” (Han et al., 2020, p. 498).

Practical Implications for Employers

As mentioned previously, workplace incivility is an antecedent to turnover intentions, and turnover intentions are an immediate predictor of actual turnover, which several researchers have pointed out can have serious financial implications for employers. Gallow, for example, identified loss of clients, low employee morale, and the costs of recruiting and training new employees as some of the most obvious costs of high employee turnover (2021). Namin et al. wrote that, according to one estimation, “cognitive distraction from work and project delays caused by workers being subjected to incivility lead to an annual cost of \$14,000 per employee” (2021, p. 1). Another estimate suggests that costs related to employee turnover account for a minimum of 5% loss in total annual revenue (Namin et al., 2021). In addition to the considerable financial costs associated with workplace incivility and turnover, Namin et al. pointed out that there are considerable human costs associated with uncivil behavior in the workplace (2021). Among these are “emotional exhaustion, depression, and increased fear, sadness, and anger,” as well as an increased potential for “lower organizational citizenship behavior, higher withdrawal behavior, turnover intention, and organizational exit” (Namin et al., 2021, p. 1).

Employee Turnover & Workplace Incivility

Gallow (2021) identified the five theoretical concepts that lead to employee satisfaction/dissatisfaction and the ability of employers to successfully retain employees. These include job characteristics, job satisfaction, career anchors, organizational commitment, and intention

to quit (Gallow, 2021). Interestingly, several studies conducted over the past two decades have revealed that all five of these concepts are impacted by incivility in the workplace. Included in this literature review is a review of the causes and consequences of workplace incivility, derived from Gallow's (2021) work in this area.

Job characteristics have been characterized by a model developed by organizational psychologists J. Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham. This framework identifies the core job dimensions that critically affect employees' psychological states and motivation (Oxford Reference, 2022). The five core job dimensions identified by this model are skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback (Oxford Reference, 2022). Gallow's literature review identified that "job characteristics could be one of the main factors that influence retention" (2021, p. 2). The second key indicator to remaining in one's job is job satisfaction, defined as "a feeling of fulfillment or enjoyment that a person derives from their job" (Lexico, 2022, para. 1), and often results from a combination of the core job dimensions outlined in the job characteristics model. Career anchors are defined by Gallow as "one's self-concept" because they "consist of one's talents and abilities, including skills and competencies, basic values, perception of motives and needs as they pertain to an individual's career and functions" (2021, p. 2).

A meta-analysis serving as a synthesis of modern research pertaining to incivility in the workplace demonstrated that incivility in the workplace is associated with a wide range of negative affective, well-being, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences for the victims (Han et al., 2020). Other work has supported the findings of the meta-analysis. The authors of this study identified that negative outcomes related to employee well-being, job satisfaction, and sleep were strongly associated with supervisor incivility (Holm et al., 2015).

Gallow described "organizational commitment" as a condition in which "an employee takes pride in the organization for which they work, identifies with the mission and objectives of the organization,

and works to achieve the goals” (2021, p. 2). A committed employee intends to stay at that firm for the foreseeable future and feels loyal to that organization (Gallow, 2021). An uncommitted employee, on the other hand, is not emotionally invested in the future success of the firm and, in extreme cases, may even have an intention to quit their job (Gallow, 2021). Research on workplace incivility suggests that it affects employees’ relationships with their organization and its members, leading to lower organizational commitment (Han et al., 2020).

Findings from another recent study suggests that, through job insecurity, workplace incivility also has negative impacts on work engagement, measured in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Guo et al., 2020). Holm et al. found that supervisor incivility was strongly associated with turnover intention (2015), which, as Gallow pointed out, “is one of the strongest predictors and an immediate precursor of employee turnover” (2021, p. 2). One model of the experiences and consequences of workplace incivility integrates tenets of “the perpetrator-predation paradigm (Cortina, 2017) with the stressor-strain model (e.g., Beehr, 1995; De Jonge & Kompier, 1997) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964)” (Han et al., 2020, p. 499). This model suggests that environmental factors (i.e., leadership styles), as well as victim dispositional (i.e., personality traits) and victim demographic (i.e., gender) individual differences, may be antecedents to experienced incivility (Han et al., 2020).

Implications For Research

Han et al. pointed out that it is critically important for all organizations to understand how to prevent workplace incivility, especially given its “deleterious consequences” (2020, p. 501). Alarming, however, their work revealed that there is “limited research centered on the role of the organizational environment in terms of leadership, culture, and structural processes that might facilitate or impede the occurrence of incivility” (Han et al., 2020, p. 518). Furthermore, Nelson pointed out that “despite knowledge that incivility has clear costs for employees and organizations, relatively little is known about the effect of incivility on a key resource in the workplace: communication” (2016, p. 1).

Gallow argued that employers could avoid some of the high costs of employee turnover by implementing an effective retention strategy, but she also pointed out that “little evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of any specific strategy is currently available” (2021, p. 1).

Combining these viewpoints and other learnings from the literature review, several things become evident. Firstly, given the enormous costs and prevalence of workplace incivility, all employers should concern themselves with devising and implementing preventative and prescriptive measures to address uncivil behavior in the workplace at an organizational level (for example, as part of the employee retention strategy). Secondly, it is apparent that more research is needed to figure out how to address the issue of workplace incivility at an organizational level (leadership, culture, and structural processes that might facilitate or impede the occurrence of incivility) and to test the effectiveness of these specific strategies. Finally, it is possible that, by studying the relationship between incivility and communication, scholars may discover new, innovative strategies for addressing workplace incivility and, by extension, improving employee retention. The study included below uses a pre-test/posttest, quasi-experimental design to determine whether training employees in effective communication techniques could be an effective method for addressing incivility in the workplace.

Methods

The purpose of the study was to test whether teaching people new communication skills and concepts could have a meaningful impact on how they approach polarizing, controversial, triggering, or contentious discussions. In other words, the study aims to test the effectiveness of using educational interventions as a specific strategy for decreasing the occurrence of incivility. The study’s findings were designed to be applicable and relevant to employers who might consider educational intervention as a method for decreasing the occurrence of workplace incivility and, by extension, improving employee retention.

Study Design

The study had a total of 129 participants, all of whom were recruited through Cloud Research to ensure that the panel was representative of the general population and free from selection bias. Cloud Research, which was formerly known as TurkPrime, is considered to be the leading participant-sourcing platform for online research and surveys (Prime Research Solutions, 2022). Quotas were set up for the online panel so that it would match the United States Census Bureau data as closely as possible on the characteristics of age, gender, race, and ethnicity categories.

The final sample hit nine out of the thirteen quota targets but failed to recruit enough individuals over the age of 45 as well as Black and Asian identifying individuals. The demographic questions embedded in the survey itself revealed that there were participants from various demographics. For example, 96% of the sample was between the ages of 18-70, nearly 86% said their highest level of education was somewhere between graduating high school and graduating with a bachelor's degree, and 67% said that their yearly household income is at least \$25,000. Given these demographics, it is likely that the majority of the sample population can be considered “employed” or “employable,” making them a relevant population for the purposes of testing whether workplace incivility can be decreased by teaching new communication skills and concepts.

The study was designed as an online questionnaire that was split up into three main sections. In the first part of the study, participants were asked about their political views and involvement in social movements and organizations. Additionally, they were asked to rate their communication skills using a five-point frequency scale. In this section, participants were also asked to rate their comfort levels when sharing political views, religious beliefs, advocacy work, social movement involvement, gender identity, and sexual orientation with immediate family members, close friends, extended family, extended circle of friends or acquaintances, and colleagues. The last part of the study collected background information such as gender identity, sexual

orientation, age, education level, household income levels, religious affiliation, and other geographic information. All of these questions were designed to give the researchers background information about who was participating in the study, although the most important insights for employers came from the middle part of the study.

The middle part of the study was designed as an experiment, testing whether an educational interference would have a meaningful impact on the occurrence of incivility. In the first part of this section, participants were asked to respond to three hypothetical online discussions. Next, they were asked to watch one of three YouTube videos, and, finally, they were asked to respond to three more hypothetical scenarios. The hypothetical discussions served as the dependent variable and provided the opportunity to test whether the videos or manipulated variables impacted the communication behaviors of participants.

To ensure the highest quality data, all six of the hypothetical discussions were about the same topic: gender and sexual freedom. This highly controversial topic was intentionally used to trigger emotional responses from participants. In order to prompt responses from participants with varied beliefs, each discussion thread was intentionally designed to contain an inflammatory comment from both a supporter and a non-supporter of gender and sexual freedom. Participants' responses were analyzed using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to test whether the introduction of the independent variable (the video) changed the way participants engaged with the discussions.

As mentioned previously, participants were shown one of three videos. The first video, titled "Ludwick Marishane: A bath without water," acted as a control video (this video will be referred to as "Control Video"). The other two videos were about communication studies topics. One of them explained the basic concepts of the Social Identity Theory (Identity Video), while the third and final video gave participants twelve tips to improve their communication skills (Tips Video). It was predicted during the design phase that those participants who watched

the Identity Video and the Tips Video would show an improvement in their communication style with others (H1), while those who watched the Control Video would not show any discernable change (H2). This change was measured in terms of civility and incivility, which will be further explained in the next section.

Analytic Strategy

In this study, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to categorize and analyze the responses of participants. First, the responses from all six hypothetical discussions were coded qualitatively as being "civil," "uncivil," or "void." In order to ensure consistency in the data analysis, specific criteria for each type of answer were defined ahead of time, and the researcher coded the responses without knowing which video the participant had watched. For this study, an answer was considered "civil" if it communicated an opinion or showed engagement with the topic while using first person, noncritical language. Any response that used curse words, direct attacks, or communicated an opinion in a harmful, one-sided, or disrespectful way was marked as uncivil. Any answer that was unrelated, unintelligible, or showed a lack of engagement was marked as void and eliminated from the analysis. These criteria were adapted from the definition of incivility in the workplace used by Andersson and Pearson (1999).

Next, participants were filtered out for having all of their answers marked as void or for showing signs of clearly ignoring the prompts of the study. During this process, the responses of 52 participants (40.31% of the total participants) were rejected for failing to engage with the prompts. In the last step of the analysis, the remaining participants' answers were summed and analyzed quantitatively in the context of the hypothesis. In this step, it was tested whether the overall number of civil and uncivil comments increased, decreased, or stayed the same after the participants watched one of the three videos. As mentioned previously, it was predicted that those participants who watched the Identity Video and the Tips Video would show an improvement in their communication style with others measured through an increase in civil comments and decrease in uncivil com-

ments (H1), while those who watched the Control Video would not show any discernable change (H2).

Results

After 52 participants who failed to respond to the discussion prompts were filtered out, there were 27 participants in the Control Video Group, 22 in the Identity Video Group, and 28 in the Tips Video Group (n=77). Since there were six hypothetical discussions presented in total, these participants produced a total of 162 pertinent data points for the Control Video Group, 132 for the Identity Video Group, and 168 for the Tips Video Group. As mentioned earlier, the first step in data analysis involved coding each data point as being “civil,” “uncivil,” or “void” according to the pre-defined criteria. Table 1 shows the total number of data points, and it breaks down the number of comments by category (civil, uncivil, and void), point in time (pre-video and post-video), and group (Control Video, Identity Video, and Tips Video)

Table 1: Total Number of Individual Responses

The table below includes all of the responses that were coded by the researcher

	Before Video			After Video			Total
	Civil	Uncivil	Void	Civil	Uncivil	Void	
Control Video	42	25	14	46	28	7	162
Identity Video	30	16	20	26	17	23	132
Tips Video	38	26	20	41	19	24	168

The second step of the data analysis process entailed summing up the civil and uncivil comments for each group and unique point in time

(Table 2). This number was then used as the denominator when calculating the percentages of civil and uncivil comments for each category. The final step in this process (Table 3) involved comparing the changes in these percentages to test the hypothesis that the control group would not see a significant change (H2) in civility and that those who watched the Identity and Tips videos would see a meaningful change (H1).

Table 2: Responses Considered in the Final Analysis

The table below only includes the responses that were considered in the data analysis

	Before Video			After Video		
	Civil	Uncivil	Total	Civil	Uncivil	Total
Control Video	42	25	67	46	28	74
Identity Video	30	16	46	26	17	43
Tips Video	38	26	64	41	19	60

Table 3: Change in Civility

The table below shows the change in civility based on data analysis

	Before Video			After Video			Change
	Civil	Uncivil	Total	Civil	Uncivil	Total	
Control Video	62.7%	37.3%	100%	62.2%	37.8%	100%	-.5%
Identity Video	65.2%	34.8%	100%	60.5%	39.5%	100%	-4.8%
Tips Video	59.4%	40.6%	100%	68.3%	31.7%	100%	+8.9%

As is demonstrated in Table 3, the Control Video Group saw a 0.5% increase in incivility. Meanwhile, the Identity Video Group saw a 4.8%

increase in incivility, and the Tips Video Group, which saw the largest change in civility, saw an 8.9% increase in civility. These results support the hypothesis that those who watched the Control Video would not see a significant change in their communication behavior (H2). They also partially support the hypothesis that those who watched one of the other two videos would see a change in their communication behavior (H1). It was originally predicted, however, that both the Identity Video and the Tips Video Groups would see an increase in civility and a decrease in incivility. Although this was true for the Tips Video Group, the results of the study indicate that those who watched the Identity Video saw an increase in incivility.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that working-age adults are both willing and capable of adapting their communication behaviors as a result of learning new communication skills and concepts. Additionally, the findings suggest that teaching people new communication skills and concepts can have a meaningful impact on the occurrence of incivility. This is supported by the fact that both the Tips Video Group and the Identity Video Group saw meaningful changes in the occurrence of incivility, while the Control Video Group did not. The findings also suggested, however, that the actual content of learning material is extremely important to take into consideration when addressing these types of issues. As demonstrated by the Identity Video Group, sometimes teaching new communication skills and concepts out of context can have the opposite of the intended effect or desired outcome.

These are important findings for employers who are considering addressing workplace incivility as part of their employee retention strategy because they suggest that incivility occurs in part because people lack the proper communication skills, not because they are malicious or wish to do harm. This supports the original assumption that incivility often occurs accidentally or through an “ambiguous intent to do harm”

(Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 456). This is good news for employers because it implies that, as the findings from the study suggested, employees can be taught how to communicate in an effective manner and avoid uncivil behavior in the workplace.

Another important finding for employers to consider is the fact that certain learning materials had the opposite of the intended effect. It was originally predicted that after watching the Identity Theory video, participants would be more sympathetic to people with different social identities. Results suggest, however, that some participants had the opposite effect, where they felt more secure in their own identity and felt emboldened to share their own viewpoints, often resulting in uncivil comments. This finding suggests that employers who are implementing new strategies to address incivility in the workplace should carefully test the effectiveness of their material before broadly disseminating it. Finally, the findings suggest that those who have already tried strategies to address incivility and feel like the problem has seen no change (or has even gotten worse) should revisit the material that was used and test it to see if it may have had the opposite intended effect.

Conclusion

Workplace incivility and employee retention are two closely related concepts that have consequential implications for organizations. As Gallow pointed out, an effective employee retention strategy can “significantly reduce the high costs of increased turnover, prevent the loss of company knowledge, protect the intellectual property of the organization, diminish the interruption of customer service and maintain the goodwill of the company, which in turn will regain the efficiency and effectiveness of the services” (2021, p. 1). It has already been established that addressing workplace incivility at an organizational level is a major part of discouraging employee turnover and, therefore, should be a major consideration in the creation and implementation of any employee retention strategy.

The study outlined above considered whether teaching employees how to be more effective communicators in the face of controversy and interpersonal differences could be an effective method for addressing incivility in the workplace. The findings from the study suggested that, when executed properly, this method can have a meaningful impact on the occurrence of incivility in working-age adults. As it was pointed out earlier, there is a significant need for more studies that aim to identify and test the effectiveness of specific strategies to address incivility in the workplace and increase employee retention – especially for those preventative and prescriptive strategies implemented at an organizational level. A major takeaway from this study for employers is that contrary to what some might believe, there are some relatively low-effort, minimal cost activities that can have a positive impact on job satisfaction and employee retention rates.

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