CIVILITY REVISITED:
FROM LIFE-ENHANCER TO PROBLEM-SOLVER

By Michael G. Fann, ARM-P, MBA

The desire for a more civil discourse within community institutions, in the political arena, in interpersonal relationships, and certainly within the workplace, continues to capture the attention of psychologists, sociologists, politicians, the news media, and yes, even you and me.

This article is written as a follow-up, a part two if you will, to the piece titled, "The Risk Control Impact of Workplace Incivility" (Public Risk, July 2010). In that article, an effort was made to outline "incivility" as the foundational cause of many of the discriminatory harassment and hostile work environment claims and lawsuits that so many organizations find themselves engaged.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
Citing Plato's call to "be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle," the article examined the conflict created when an "instant gratification," narcissistic culture is not willing to give the other person his or her "battle." In other words, give the other person a little leeway or the benefit of the doubt while dealing with their stresses of the day. Instead of giving the other person a little leeway, our current culture commands that you let the other person know immediately how you feel about what they've said or done. The "I want it my way and I want it right now" call of our current culture has its foundation in our fundamental right of due process... our right to be heard—a right that is vital to our republic.

However, our "right to be heard" must always be evaluated in tandem with our responsibilities to each other as human beings. In a civil society, you can't separate rights from responsibilities.

In the previous article, we also borrowed Walt Disney's analysis that everyone in life is either a life-enhancer, a lawnmower, or a well-poisoner. Disney insisted that we should strive daily to be a life-enhancer for everyone we encounter. However, is it enough to simply have a sound philosophical foundation in a culture when so many people have a blind spot regarding their own personal behaviors? At some point, we have to shift the civility movement from the philosophical to the pragmatic. As Will Rogers said, "You can be on the right track and still get run over if you just stand there." Perhaps it's time to move from simply being a life-enhancer to actually solving the problem.
MANAGE THE RISK

So, what do we do? How about “manage the risk”? Within the risk management process, risk professionals are taught that, if it’s important, you write it down. Once you’ve identified a foreseeable exposure, you analyze and select an approach to address that exposure. Developing a written policy or statement of values outlining that the organization expects a work environment free from hostile, offensive, uncivil and otherwise inappropriate behaviors is a must.

Once the organization has documented its expectations regarding the parameters of acceptable behavior, the policy needs to be presented to the staff for discussion and understanding. These training sessions are designed to convey the entity’s expectations but also to provide the staff with an opportunity to ask questions, discuss, develop understanding and perhaps even object to the policy being outlined.

Once the policy is outlined and training provided, then the entity must supervise, lead and provide the proper example for its staff. Supervisors must ensure that the policy and behavioral expectations are being applied consistently and fairly across the organization. Administrators and senior leaders must also insist that supervisors are supporting the civility effort, and actually supervise the supervisors.

The next step in implementing the new policy is providing and supporting a strong disciplinary structure. This structure needs to not only include the administrative remedies designed to correct inappropriate behaviors, but also the more positive aspects of discipline. In other words, is it possible that people are making good decisions and we can catch staff members doing things right? We need to support the good decisions our staff may be making, and then reinforce these acceptable behaviors.

A city administrator was heard to make this statement, “We made a policy decision to support and cultivate a culture of civility... to promote a positive spirit in the organization. And we insist that everyone participate.” That’s how you change a culture, when civility becomes a condition of employment and all employees are evaluated as such. Through recognition and incentive, the organization’s staff needs to be rewarded for grasping this important culture shift.

HOW YOU ENGAGE PEOPLE

Seriously, you want me to include “Foundational Interpersonal Skills” as part of our organization’s employee training program? YES! One goal of civility is for all staff to show regard and consideration for the other person before they speak or act. However, perceptions become reality, and many people suffer from inadequate interpersonal skills and, therefore, are perceived to have been inappropriate, abrasive or offensive regardless of intent. Even if your training effort includes just basic “skill with people” such as encouraging staff to (1) smile, (2) engage in active listening (i.e. listen with your eyes and nod your head occasionally), (3) show genuine regard for your co-workers (you can only fake this for a short period), (4) develop a professional, firm handshake, and (5) engage your co-workers by asking questions beginning with who, what, where, when, or how based on items from their lives that they have shared in the workplace. Obviously, there’s a danger threshold here and one must not cross the personal boundaries for subjects that
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would be deemed illegal under Title VI or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, but truly, "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

COMPASSIONATE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Insist that everyone in the organization follow a simple, effective and compassionate conflict resolution process. While there are many effective methods of accomplishing this, the bottom line is that when someone says or does something that someone might find inappropriate, offensive or hostile, a staff member (either the one offended or another) needs to (1) give it a few seconds, (2) go to that person privately in a respectful, unemotional and non-threatening way, and (3) call their attention to the potentially inappropriate behavior.

Now the conflict resolution "ball" is in the potential offender's court. That person needs to respond in a respectful, unemotional and non-threatening way. He or she either agrees with what has been brought to their attention (i.e. "You know you're right... I shouldn't have said that.").

or disagrees (i.e. "I really don't think what I said was that bad, but let's talk about it."). Keeping the lines of communication open in a respectful way is vital.

At some point, the two parties to this conversation will hopefully come to an agreement as to whether the behavior was inappropriate or not. If they do not, then a third-party (ideally, a supervisor) is brought into the conversation, both viewpoints expressed, and the matter resolved through supervisory involvement. And, as Dr. Karl Menninger points out, "Attitudes are more important than facts." The supervisor must constantly be studying the attitudes with which staff approaches potential conflict and negative situations.

Again, this process sounds simple, but it certainly isn't easy. All too often, one or both of the parties to the conflict inject emotion and hostility into the equation and then the resolution process deteriorates quickly.

PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The critical function for administrators and supervisors is to engage the staff when the "red flags" go up. In other words, don't wait until the police department or the attorneys have been called, jump in early and manage your way through the conflict. So, manage at the "red flag" level and, from time to time, conduct "stay interviews" with your most positive, productive staff members. Most are familiar with "exit interviews." But you rarely get objective feedback in those! Identify staff members who are generally positive and happy about working for the organization, and seem to really enjoy their jobs, and interview them about what they like about the organization, and what they believe could be improved. You're more likely to get an objective evaluation and suggestion in these circumstances.

Finally, and it's worth repeating, SET THE EXAMPLE (my apologies for screaming). Executive leaders, administrators and supervisors who firmly grasp and implement these positive changes, and then lead by example, will go farther and faster in creating positive change within the organization's culture.

A good final word to contemplate when considering the interpersonal and conflict management dynamics within your organization is an old African proverb: "If you want to go quickly, go alone... If you want to go far, go together." Our personal and professional lives are full of examples where much more was accomplished, more successfully and with a greater sense of satisfaction when we chose to cooperate, engage others positively in a cause and go there together. "Now..." as Sheriff Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith) used to tell his son, Opie (Ron Howard) at the front door to the courthouse, "...go out there and act like somebody.

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