HIDDEN ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS FACED BY PUBLIC ENTITIES

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THE RISK CONTROL IMPACT OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY
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By Michael G. Fann, ARM-P, MBA

Risk control is defined as “reducing the frequency and severity of potential losses by preventing loss-causing events and by taking measures to ensure that losses are kept to a minimum when an event occurs.”

When a new program, product, service or operation presents itself, the responsible risk manager immediately begins to evaluate the political, legal, regulatory, financial, technological, economic, natural and competitive risk exposures. Each of these assessment areas deserve the risk professional’s attention and require discerning critical thinking.

If risk reduction is desirable—that is, engaging calculated methods to change the likelihood of loss occurrence by allocating resources where they matter most and digging deep to treat the root causes of loss—then many would find it valuable to invest time and energy in examining how poorly, or beneficially, their work environment would be rated on the “civility scale.” After being a somewhat discerning observer of the public entity workplace for roughly 25 years, it has become fairly obvious that foundational human behaviors (some subconsciously and others overt, validated and reinforced) dictate whether the organization has a productive work environment or an environment conducive to hostility, or at least one that is counter-productive.

While much (some would say too much) of risk management focuses on “compliance with minimum standards,” in many organizations “behavior” doesn’t get the same attention. However, many risk managers and other professionals will tell you that the overall morale within an organization is one of the clearest indicators of its claims experience in the near term.

So, if many understand the importance of civil behaviors within the workplace, then what could possibly be the reason that, in a recent survey on civility by U.S. News & World Report, as many as 89 percent of Americans observe that incivility is a serious problem in our culture today?
How does one go about fundamentally changing their workplace, making civility a critical value in their organization? You talk about it all the time. You make civility a part of every presentation, a message in every conversation and a seed to be planted at every opportunity.

CIVILITY
From a legal perspective, most organizations begin to address the subject of civility at the constitutional level. The protected classes, outlined in Titles VI and VII for “equal protection” purposes, of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, age and disability are designed to ensure that no harassment or other discriminatory behavior is occurring. However, a number of organizations have now adopted a Productive Workplace Policy designed to address harassment or other disruptive behavior, for practicality any reason, that substantially inhibits a person’s ability to accomplish their job tasks effectively. This could be used to prohibit personality-based harassing behavior or even undesirable horseplay.

Ultimately, an organization’s policies should have a goal to remove harassment or a hostile work environment such that the behaviors do not become so pervasive that the working conditions are unduly oppressive. In summary, these legal standards need to lead the entity to establish norms for acceptable behavior such that staff is respectful in what they say, respectful in what they show and respectful in all they do.

YOUR PERSONAL OUTLOOK
Civility is generally defined as a polite act or expression, showing regard for others, or acts that contribute to smoothness and ease in dealings with people. One might say it is simply giving consideration to others before you act. Sounds simple and it truly is. But is it easy? All too often in our current culture, those who truly desire to treat others with civility will have to do so in circumstances and environments where the other person or group of people simply do not have the same desire. You must choose to be respectful even when the other person does not.

Walt Disney remarked that everyone in life is one of two different kinds of people: either a life-enhancer or a well-poisoner. Life-enhancers are typically easy to identify and hopefully every reader has at least one or two of these folk in his or her life. These are people you absolutely enjoy being around. They have some enthusiasm or passion about something and they tend to uplift and encourage the people they are around.

Some well-poisoners are easy to identify. They are just grumpy, grouchy, negative people. Other well-poisoners are not so easy to identify but are just as effective at injecting poison into your life. Some of these people are well-meaning, loving folks that want to “protect” you from disappointment in unfulfilled hopes and dreams. How many of us have been excited about the prospects of a potential career change, promotion or substantial raise in pay only to hear Aunt Mabel sweetly say, “Now don’t get your hopes up”? Just one of any number of droplets of poison and hopelessness that people drop into your well each and every day.

As others impact us, we need to be conscious that our words and actions are impacting them as well. Are the messages we’re sending positive or negative? Are we lifting people up or tearing them down?

While civility encompasses politeness, respect, affirmation, self-restraint and tolerance, it might also be said that, at least in the workplace, the Golden Rule might not be enough any more. Perhaps a Platinum Rule should be followed that suggests we try to treat others, at least to a reasonable sensitivity, the way they would like to be treated.

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IS IT ME OR IS IT YOU?
Refer back to the Civility Survey by U.S. News and World Report. This survey was conducted in the aftermath of three internationally televised examples of inappropriate behavior by people who likely knew better. On the heels of an elected official yelling out that the president of the United States was a liar, a champion tennis player making extreme threats to a linesperson for a perceived bad call and an internationally known music artist perhaps intentionally embarrassing a winner at an awards show because he felt someone else should have won, this survey revealed that 89 percent of the people interviewed said that incivility was a serious problem in today’s society and 90 percent of those same people said that they were not personally rude.

While it’s possible that only 10 percent of the population could be causing this perception, it is not likely. Some of us in the 90 percent need to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that, at least on occasion, “It wasn’t just you, perhaps it was me.” We must overcome the “blindsided” of comparing others’ actions to our intentions. As Shakespeare wrote, “To thine own self be true.”

INCIVILITY
Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others and may include an ambiguous intent to harm the target. This behavior might manifest as acts or words whose purpose is to insult, humiliate, embarrass or injure the dignity of others. It may include scape-goating, backstabbing, perpetuating rumors and possibly unethical or dishonest behavior.

These behaviors result in lowered morale of employees and reduced team effectiveness that costs the organization in terms of lost work time and productivity, higher turnover, work avoidance, higher health costs due to stress and potentially higher costs due to increased litigation.

In a basic risk assessment, potential causes of workplace incivility, or a toxic work environment, could be an authoritative management style, inconsistent or unpredictable supervision, acceptance of disrespectful behavior, inadequate conflict resolution process or training or basic personal insecurities. All of these causes may serve to reduce morale and productivity and contribute to increases in workplace injuries, employment liability claims and exposure to workplace violence from disgruntled employees.

PARTING THOUGHTS
If it is true, in fact, that the 89 percent are accurate and we live in a society where incivility has become a serious cultural problem, then where do we begin? While it may be true that we live in the most uncivil times in recent history, this is certainly not a new problem. Our culture did not get to this point overnight and there certainly is no quick fix. You’ll likely have to begin small and slowly. Within your organization you may have to start with one person... you.

Every major change takes place with one initial first step. To take that step, you should decide before you start that you won’t wait for someone to be nice to you and that you won’t be “keeping score”... that is, you’ll likely have to “let some things slide” coming from others. This is especially true of relatively small slights that you know could possibly be unintentional. Mahatma Gandhi said, “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” So be the one to change first. The biggest risk for your organization is not creating or maintaining a culture of anger and incivility... but rather creating a culture of indifference where employees no longer care.

If it is our desire to reduce the frequency and severity of potential losses by preventing loss-causing events, then an assertive program at promoting civility within your organization will aid in the effort to ensure that losses are kept to a reasonable minimum.

Michael G. Fearn, ARM-P, MBA, is director of loss control for the TML Risk Management Pool in Brentwood, Tenn.

END NOTES:
2. ISO 31000