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Not-So-Nice Costs As Work Stress Mounts

Rise in Office Rudeness Weighs On Productivity, Retention

By **LORETTA CHAO** Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL *January 17, 2006; Page B4*

As workloads mount and email and phone communication are increasingly used instead of face-to-face conversations, office rudeness is on the rise.

From bosses who don't acknowledge employees for entire days, failing to say good morning or leave time to talk during the day, to managers so frazzled that they perpetually lash out at employees, the result of office rudeness is the same, experts say: It hurts productivity and efforts to retain talent.

Rudeness "is becoming more of a problem in the workplace," says Dana Law, an organizational psychologist and president of Sankora Executive Solutions Inc. in Bessemer, Ala. "People have to respond in shorter time spans now and they often have greater workloads, which causes more stress," she adds.

British author Lynne Truss says rudeness in the workplace is just a natural extension of the rudeness that increasingly occurs in everyday life. After some nasty public encounters with rude people, Ms. Truss wrote her latest book, "Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door," a 200-plus page assault on poor manners. Incivility in the office is "part of a general shift to people thinking mainly about themselves," Ms. Truss says.

According to a continuing study by Christine Porath, a management professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, rudeness in the workplace can cost an organization time, effort and talent. More than 90% of nearly 3,000 people surveyed as part of the study said they had experienced incivility at work. Of these, 50% say they lost work time worrying about the incident, 50% contemplated changing jobs to avoid a recurrence, and 25% cut back their efforts on the job. One in eight said he had left a company because of a rude incident.

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Dr. Porath says her research shows that holding back on work efforts, absenteeism, and even stealing can all be signs of an organization that is struggling with rudeness.

An office manager at a Manhattan architectural interior-design firm says her two bosses, the company's co-founders, rarely converse with their workers. "They treat employees like we're not even here," she says. The company often receives gift baskets from vendors and the bosses "hoard it in their offices." They invited only half of their employees to the holiday office party, the manager says.

One employee quit after a day, says the office manager, and those on the job aren't willing to put in any extra effort. "By 5:30, whether the work is done here or not, everyone is gone."

While rudeness can hurt productivity, most cases go unreported and unnoticed by management. Managers often aren't aware of incidents of incivility or their repercussions. Of the respondents in Dr. Porath's survey, 54% said they were worried that reporting incidents of rudeness might backfire by making them seem overly sensitive.

Human-resource experts and executive coaches say managers should take responsibility for creating a better culture among their staff, a job that can be as easy as letting people know a behavior is counterproductive.

"The first step is educating people when you see it happen," says Steve Miranda, chief human resources officer for the Society of Human Resource Management, an international professional group. "Keep an eye open for it [rudeness] in group meetings ... or catch your employees in a quiet moment by the coffee pot. A few open-ended questions can get a lot of results." If you find that incivility is a problem in your office, address the perpetrator as kindly as possible, Mr. Miranda says.

Some problems are obvious. A director of information technology at a university says one former boss pounded his fist on the desk when anyone raised a question about his decisions, and once threw a pen at an employee during a meeting.

People who have been rudely fired from jobs say they have been as shaken by their boss's insensitivity as by the loss of their jobs. A West Coast public-relations manager was fired from her job at a Las Vegas agency over the phone. Her boss called her cellphone while she was sitting in an airplane on the runway. As the flight attendants announced that all phones had to be shut off, "my boss said, 'This isn't a good fit anymore, so come by after 5:30 tomorrow to pick up your things.' She should have done that in person," the PR manager says.

"It's becoming a bigger issue," Mr. Miranda says. While increasing integration of different cultures and ages make for greater chances of miscommunication, poor management of those clashes can be damaging to a corporation. "People forget that you can be kind, thoughtful, and respectful, and get the product out the door just as fast," he says.

Sharon Jordan-Evans, an executive coach based in Cambria, Calif., believes creating a civil workplace should be as important a priority for managers as organizing the workload among staff. But because most people turn their heads when they witness disrespectful behavior, and "too many leaders don't see that as part of their job," managers often don't realize they have a problem until it is too late, she says.

That is how one of her clients lost one of its most talented employees: The employee complained that one of his co-workers was being uncivil, and the problem got so bad that their manager hired Ms. Jordan-Evans to settle the dispute. "When I asked the manager what he had done about it, he said nothing, and that they were grown-ups and should be able to figure it out," she says. By the time she started working with the disputing co-workers, one was already in negotiations with another company and quit shortly thereafter.

"Today, people really won't stick around and work with jerks for very long," she says.

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