

# MANAGEMENT REVIEW

Management without theatre.

PEOPLE

## THE PRICE OF INCIVILITY

Rudeness that is small but not harmless, what it costs those on the receiving end, the spiral it can start, an experiment with dropped pencils, customers who watch, how it is measured, and a card for one incident.



# 12%

of those treated rudely at work said they had left their job because of it.

PORATH & PEARSON, 2013

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NO. 79 · PEOPLE

# In this issue

Most rudeness at work is not shouting or bullying. It is a curt reply, a question ignored, a remark in front of others. Each one looks too small to matter. This issue counts what it costs and asks what a manager can do about it.

Christine Porath and Christine Pearson polled 800 managers and employees in 17 industries: of those treated rudely, 48% cut their effort and 12% left their job. Lynne Andersson and Pearson describe how one rude act can spiral into aggression. In experiments, people treated rudely did worse and helped less, and customers who watched an employee being insulted judged the whole company more harshly. A seven-question scale measures incivility, and a card helps with one incident.

*Stiven Janaqi* EDITOR · STIVEN CATALYST

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## HOW TO READ THIS ISSUE

### Figure

Every figure has its source and year at the foot of its page.

### Our reading

Where the editors interpret rather than the research, it says so.

### Practice

The steps and the card are proposals to try, not research results.

## COVER STORY

# Small, not harmless

In 1999 Lynne Andersson and Christine Pearson gave everyday rudeness at work a name and a definition. Workplace incivility, they wrote, is

“low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect.”

**98%**

of the workers in Porath and Pearson's polls had experienced it

**1 in 4**

said in 1998 they were treated rudely at least once a week

**1 in 2**

said the same in 2011

**OUR READING**

Because each act is small, nobody reports it. Because nobody reports it, nobody counts what it costs.

Sources: Lynne M. Andersson & Christine M. Pearson, *Academy of Management Review* 24(3), 1999; Christine Porath & Christine Pearson, *Harvard Business Review* 91(1–2), 2013

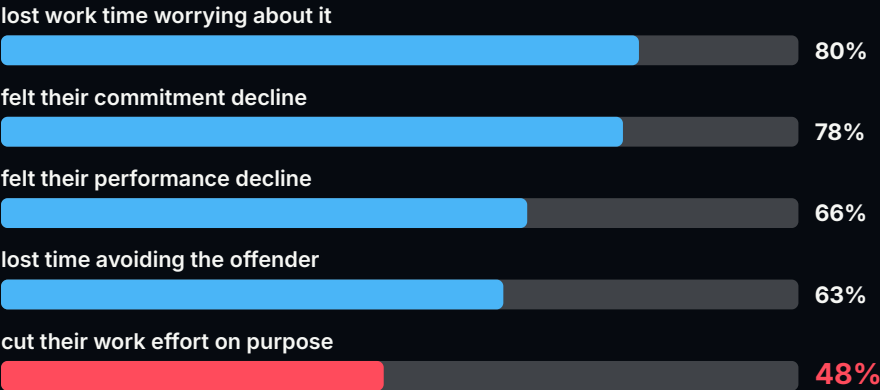
The unclear intent sets incivility apart from aggression.

THE NUMBERS

# What rudeness costs

Porath and Pearson polled 800 managers and employees in 17 industries and asked those who had been treated rudely at work what happened next.

OF THOSE TREATED RUDELY, THE SHARE WHO SAID THEY...



47% cut their time at work on purpose and 38% the quality of their work. A quarter admitted taking their frustration out on customers, and 12% said they left their job because of the way they were treated.

OUR READING

Most of the bill never shows up as a cost: effort held back, hours spent brooding, customers served worse.

Source: Christine Porath & Christine Pearson, Harvard Business Review 91(1–2), 2013

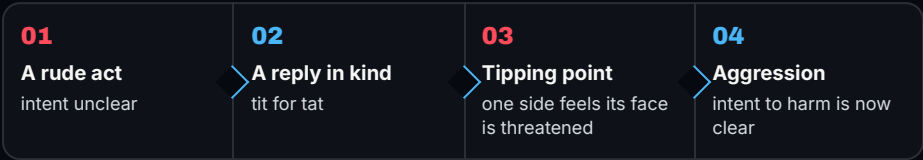
Self-reports: the poll shows what people say they did, not a measured loss. Figures as Porath and Pearson give them in the article (2013).

THE MODEL

# The incivility spiral

Andersson and Pearson describe how incivility can escalate: a rude act draws a reply in kind, and at a tipping point the exchange turns into open aggression. The spiral can be broken at any step.

THE SPIRAL (ANDERSSON & PEARSON, 1999)



OUR READING

The cheapest moment to stop a spiral is the first remark. By the tipping point it is a conflict (see No. 38).

Sources: Lynne M. Andersson & Christine M. Pearson, Academy of Management Review 24(3), 1999; Pauline Schilpzand, Irene E. De Pater & Amir Erez, Journal of Organizational Behavior 37(S1), 2016

Ways out named by the authors: ignoring the act, not retaliating, forgiving. Witnesses can start secondary spirals. The three perspectives organise the review by Schilpzand, De Pater and Erez (2016).

More in the essay

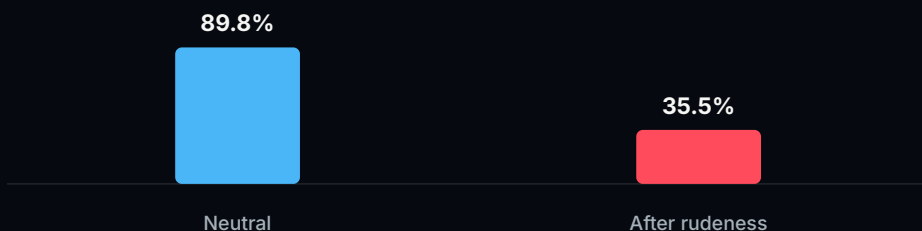
Leading people without losing the person

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

# Rudeness in the lab

Christine Porath and Amir Erez ran three experiments. In the first, 98 students saw a latecomer turned away; the experimenter then belittled students at their university. Later the experimenter knocked over a jar of pencils.

HELPED PICK UP THE PENCILS, STUDY 1 (2007)



Rudeness lowered performance on routine and creative tasks, whether it came from the experimenter, a stranger or was only imagined. In four studies by Porath, Debbie MacInnis and Valerie Folkes, customers who saw one employee call another an “idiot” judged the whole company worse, even when the employee had served badly.

**OUR READING**

Rudeness is never private. It costs the attention of the one hit and the trust of whoever is watching.

Sources: Christine L. Porath & Amir Erez, *Academy of Management Journal* 50(5), 2007; Christine Porath, Debbie MacInnis & Valerie Folkes, *Journal of Consumer Research* 37(2), 2010

Short laboratory sessions with students: they show a cause, not what happens over years at work. Porath and Erez trace the effect to disrupted thinking.

## HOW IT IS MEASURED

# Seven questions, five years

Lilia Cortina and colleagues built the Workplace Incivility Scale: seven questions on how often superiors or co-workers had treated you in certain ways over five years. Of 1,180 public-sector employees, 71% reported some incivility.

**01****Condescension**

put you down or talked down to you

**02****Not listening**

paid little attention to what you said or thought

**03****Doubt**

doubted your judgment where you are responsible

**04****Remarks and exclusion**

demeaning remarks, unprofessional address, being left out, unwanted personal talk

Women reported incivility more often than men, but both suffered alike in job satisfaction, withdrawal from work and how much their career mattered to them. Incivility went with greater psychological distress, but broader indices of psychological and physical health were relatively unaffected.

**OUR READING**

What is counted can be discussed. Asked anonymously, the same few questions make the small acts visible over time.

Source: Lilia M. Cortina, Vicki J. Magley, Jill Hunter Williams & Regina Day Langhout, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 6(1), 2001

The four groups summarise the seven items in our words; the full wording is in Cortina et al. (2001). Self-reports at one point in time.

TOOL OF THE ISSUE

# The incident card

One card for one rude incident. Write facts, not labels, speak to the person in private and soon, check again two weeks later. If flare-ups keep coming at the same moment, the 5 Whys help find the pressure behind them.

**01 What happened** what was said or done, by whom, who saw it; no labels

**02 Where in the spiral** a first act, a reply in kind, or near the tipping point

**03 The conversation** with whom, when, in private; what changes

**04 The pressure behind it** when it recurs: the hour, the handover, the delay

**05 The team norm** the one behaviour agreed, and who models it first

**06 Review date** has it happened again; what the people who saw it noticed

Sources: Lynne M. Andersson & Christine M. Pearson, *Academy of Management Review* 24(3), 1999; Christine Porath & Christine Pearson, *Harvard Business Review* 91(1–2), 2013

A practice proposed by the editors, after the spiral of Andersson and Pearson and the advice Porath and Pearson give leaders: model civility, ask for feedback, set norms with the team. The pressure explains, it does not excuse.

Open the tool: [5 Whys](#)

[stivencatalyst.com/tools/five-whys/](https://stivencatalyst.com/tools/five-whys/)

## SOURCES AND METHOD

# Every figure has a source.

The figures in this issue come from the sources below. The year shows how recent each one is.

**Tit for Tat? The Spiraling Effect of Incivility in the Workplace**

Lynne M. Andersson & Christine M. Pearson, Academy of Management Review 24(3), 1999  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.2202131>

**The Price of Incivility**

Christine Porath & Christine Pearson, Harvard Business Review 91(1–2), 2013  
<https://hbr.org/2013/01/the-price-of-incivility>

**Workplace incivility: A review of the literature and agenda for future research**

Pauline Schilpzand, Irene E. De Pater & Amir Erez, Journal of Organizational Behavior 37(S1), 2016  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1976>

**Does Rudeness Really Matter? The Effects of Rudeness on Task Performance and Helpfulness**

Christine L. Porath & Amir Erez, Academy of Management Journal 50(5), 2007  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.20159919>

**Witnessing Incivility among Employees: Effects on Consumer Anger and Negative Inferences about Companies**

Christine Porath, Debbie MacInnis & Valerie Folkes, Journal of Consumer Research 37(2), 2010  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/651565>

**Incivility in the Workplace: Incidence and Impact**

Lilia M. Cortina, Vicki J. Magley, Jill Hunter Williams & Regina Day Langhout, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology 6(1), 2001  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.6.1.64>

## EDITORIAL METHOD

Each figure was checked for its year, its publisher and what exactly it measures. Where the publisher's page could not be opened, the figure was checked against independent summaries and is marked “via”. The editors' interpretation is marked “Our reading”. Figures that could not be confirmed are not in the issue.



# **MANAGEMENT REVIEW**

Management without theatre.

Every issue, one management question, checked against the best research.

**ALL ISSUES**

[stivencatalyst.com/magazine/management-review.html](http://stivencatalyst.com/magazine/management-review.html)