



BETTER WORKPLACES
BETTER WORLD™

WORKPLACE CIVILITY HANDBOOK



OVERVIEW

Civility goes beyond simply making others feel comfortable — it's about building a dynamic, positive, and productive workplace where everyone knows they belong and has an opportunity to succeed. By practicing civility, we create a safe and empathetic environment where individuals are empowered to share their best ideas, confident that they will be heard and valued.



BACKGROUND

The concept of civility in the workplace has its roots in broader societal norms of respect, professionalism, and ethical behavior. Historically, workplace interactions were often hierarchical, with strict authority structures that sometimes limited open dialogue and collaboration. As workplaces have evolved over time, so has an emphasis on creating environments that prioritize mutual respect, inclusivity, and effective communication. Additionally, successful leaders have realized that a respectful work environment facilitates a positive employee experience. Moreover, creating a civil workplace is simply good for business: U.S. organizations collectively lose approximately \$2.7 billion per day in reduced productivity and absenteeism due to incivility, according to [SHRM research](#). In addition to those daily costs, incivility may also be driving workers to leave their jobs.

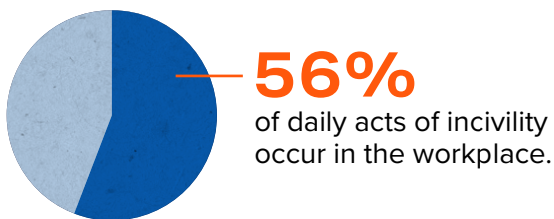
BUSINESS CASE

A respectful workplace culture is essential for a thriving organization. When colleagues, customers, and clients are treated with civility, a positive atmosphere is created, boosting employee morale and engagement. This, in turn, fosters increased collaboration and productivity while reducing absenteeism. The alternative — an uncivil workplace — can lead to significant costs. High turnover, often a consequence of incivility, is expensive, with replacement costs potentially reaching three times the departing employee's salary. According to the [SHRM Benchmarking: Talent Access Report](#), the average time to fill a vacant position is 54 days, so turnover also disrupts productivity and negatively impacts remaining employees. Investing in a civil workplace is a far more effective strategy than dealing with the fallout of incivility.

RESEARCH

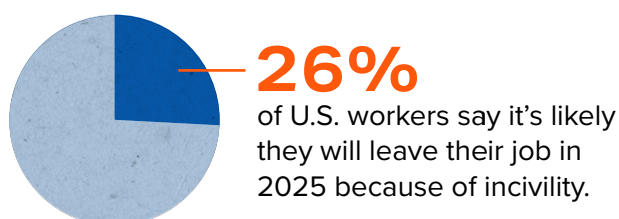
According to the [SHRM Q1 2025 Civility Index](#), incivility in the workplace continues to rise. Since the release of SHRM's original index at the start of 2024, there has been a 30% increase in reported instances of incivility. Furthermore, compared to Q1 2024, reports of workplace incivility stemming from differences in political viewpoints have surged by 51%.

STATISTICS



OVER 50% of U.S. workers believe our society is uncivil.

LOOKING FORWARD



Source:
[SHRM Q1 2025 Civility Index, March 2025.](#)



THE EMPLOYER'S ROLE

As a business leader, you wield considerable influence within your organization. When you model civility, you establish an expectation of open, productive dialogue in the workplace, even during difficult conversations. The Q3 2024 SHRM Civility Index found that by setting an example of what civility looks like in action, you can improve the culture of your organization and create lasting business benefits, including [greater productivity and staff retention](#). According to SHRM's [The State of Global Workplace Culture in 2023](#) report, employees at organizations with equitable leadership practices, including the appreciation of employees' perspectives, were 19 times more likely to rate the organization's culture as good or excellent.

At its core, civility is about treating others with respect and kindness, even in challenging situations. Civility goes beyond the simple politeness of refraining from personal attacks or disrespectful behavior. It involves listening actively and acknowledging diverse perspectives so that others feel fully heard. By modeling these behaviors, you can set standards for everyone else to follow and even increase your standing within the organization as you develop a reputation for consensus building among your fellow leaders.

According to the [SHRM Q4 2024 Civility Index](#), workers continue to identify gaps in a crucial element of preventing and managing incivility in the workplace: the role of managers and supervisors. As in previous quarters, many U.S. workers who personally experienced or witnessed incivility at work said managers may be creating work environments that breed incivility.

More than two-thirds of U.S. workers (69%) said they expect their organization to try to address civil discourse at work. It's critical for executives and senior leaders to create and execute strategic initiatives that directly address incivility in the workplace and clearly define what behavior is and is not acceptable. They must lead by example and exhibit civil behavior while holding people managers and employees accountable for their behavior and actions.



SHRM research revealed that the most common responses to workplace incivility were workers removing themselves from the uncivil situation (53%) or simply ignoring the incivility (50%). It's important to encourage employees and people managers to reinforce a culture of civility and share instances of incivility with their leaders and HR representatives.

HR representatives can help organizational leaders understand the importance of a civil culture and the costs associated with not intentionally making this a priority. HR can also help leaders define what constitutes civil behavior. By ensuring everyone has a similar understanding of what constitutes civil and uncivil behavior, your team can communicate more effectively and navigate disagreements constructively.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ALIGNING CIVILITY WITH BUSINESS STRATEGY

“Fostering civility in the workplace is not just about politeness — it’s a strategic business imperative,” SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, wrote in *U.S. News & World Report*. “Companies that prioritize civility are more likely to attract and retain top talent, foster innovation, and achieve long-term success. In doing so, they protect their employees and their reputation for the customers, patients, or clients they serve.”

[Resource: How to Promote Civility in the Workplace](#)

SHRM research examined which practices were consistently associated with positive workplace culture perceptions and how those practices could be grouped to create actionable areas for employers. The research found five dimensions that influence workplace culture perceptions. These dimensions are summarized in SHRM’s [Global Workplace Culture Model](#).

Equitable Leadership Practices was by far the most influential dimension. When equity is high, employees are 19 times more likely to rate their culture as good or excellent.

SHRM research found that the top 10 drivers of a positive workplace culture belong to the **Equitable Leadership Practices**, **Career Fulfillment**, and **Good Manager Communication** dimensions. Employers can identify their areas of weakness among these 10 drivers to determine which actions to target first.

TOP 10 DRIVERS of positive workplace culture:

1. Transparent communication from leadership.
2. Fair performance evaluations.
3. Employees’ pride in their work.
4. Active solicitation of employee feedback by the organization.
5. Employees can trust what the manager says.
6. Appreciation of employees’ unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.
7. Ability to make a complaint about a leader without punishment.
8. A meaningful career.
9. Manager seeks employee input before making decisions.
10. Opportunities for career growth.

BUILDING YOUR ROAD MAP TO A CULTURE OF CIVILITY

1. Identify Future State

To create a culture of civility and opportunity, you must first define what that means to you and your organization. It's important to understand that organizations may create a culture of civility by using different descriptors. Granted, many may be the same; however, you need to ensure that the path you set out on is the right one for your organization.

Secondly, you need to define your current culture. Then, plan your strategy on measuring and communicating progress and celebrating your successes.

The culture journey is continuous. You must remain vigilant about protecting and maintaining your desired culture. This means every new hire is critical. Do not hire just to fill a spot. You want to hire for cultural fit. Gerald Bell of the Bell Leadership Institute has found that when a person is, at minimum, an 80% fit for culture, they will succeed. If they are less than an 80% fit, they will fail.

The same holds true for promotions. Is the person a great fit to be a people manager and a great fit for your desired culture? If they are not, do not promote them — consider if training is needed. If so, provide the training and development before promoting the person. This is when having a succession plan or ready promotion list is critical.

Who will help you in being protectors of your culture? You will need everyone in the organization. Consider them “Guardians of the Culture.” Are you ready to get started?

Steps to identify what you want your culture to become:

- Speak with your CEO. Understand their needs and wants for your culture. This is the first step in beginning to define your desired culture. The eight elements of culture are: language, beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions, symbols, and artifacts. These components define how individuals interact and share their experiences. Culture is not necessarily your guiding principles or core values, but your guiding principles and core values help steer you toward your desired culture and thus should be aligned.
- When meeting with the CEO, if you have a hard time getting started, ask this question: “I’d like to set you up on a date with a company. What characteristics must the company have, and what must they not have?” Example: “I’m looking for someone (a company) who is empathetic, super smart, results-oriented, curious, trustworthy, driven, and a lot of fun.” Then, what must the company not be? Example: “I do not want someone (a company) that sits back and waits for anything — instead, they make it happen. I don’t want someone who’s not respectful to all people, who condemns cutting-edge technology and tools, and who is highly egotistical.” This can be a great opener to get dialogue going.
- What you and the CEO determine will be the “desired” state to use as a starting point. Remember, there are cultures in every work group — but this focus begins at the top.

Next Steps

Have a strategic planning session with your executive team. Share the desired state that you and the CEO developed. Discuss, push back, add, and then agree. If all do not agree, it's important to understand where the disconnect is. Will this disagreement be a derailer? If so, you must resolve this before going to the next step.

Keep reminding all stakeholders that what you're describing is not the current culture, but the desired culture. Write down words to describe your desired culture and how you define them. Ideally, you should select six or fewer words or phrases.



HOW DO YOU DEFINE YOUR IDEAL WORKPLACE CULTURE?

Innovative — We think outside the box and allow failure in order to be able to grow better.

Trustworthy and ethical — We do the right thing even if it may be detrimental to ourselves, we are our word, and we place a high value on our employees' integrity. Trust does not go one way. Employers need to place trust in their employees and their work and need to trust them to get the job done right. Those employees then need to trust that the employer will protect them and have their best interests at heart.

Focused on learning — We continuously learn and are hungry to learn more.

Fun — We like to work hard, delivering results while we're enjoying ourselves.

Smart and curious — We encourage asking "why." We push through the limits or boundaries; we seek to do things better even if we fail.

Fiscally responsible — We're judicious in where and how we spend the company's money, ensuring all expenditures help us achieve our mission and goals.

Empathetic — We experience what you experience and are with you for every step of the journey. You are not alone. We engage in open communication and create deep relationships in which we can speak our mind without consequences.

Note: Not all words may be viewed as positive, but it's important to be true to what the desired state is. For example, "relentless" may sound exhausting and unbalanced, but when describing the desired state, it can signify a culture that is determined, ambitious, and always striving for excellence.

Now you have your desired state and have defined what you want your culture to be.

Some organizations elect to hire a consultant to assist with this process. Many organizations, though, do not have the resources to do so or are not willing to pay an external source for this work. Again, this is a discussion you will need to have with your CEO upfront.

2. Define Current State

You will need a second strategic planning session for the executive team to assess your current culture (company, unit, division, department, sub-department). Often, it helps to break these into two meetings: desired and current. The process of defining your current culture is similar to identifying your desired culture. Consider asking the following questions:

- Who is a hero or someone that all leaders in the organization admire and look up to — at any level or role in the organization? Why? (You are seeking characteristic descriptors.)
- Who are the offenders or disruptors of the organization? Why? Or, ask what the cause of past terminations was (remember to not get into highly confidential information).

It may be easier to get the group started by having them write their ideas on sticky notes (one color for heroes and one color for villains) and place them on a wall or flipchart. You can also use a virtual cloud. Once you have completed this exercise, discuss each word or phrase as a team. Come to an agreement about whether it is a hero characteristic or a villain characteristic.

Because this is your current culture, it is more than likely that there will be a gap between the current and desired states. Some of your current leaders may not fit the desired state.



3. Accountability

You must hold all leaders accountable to live the new culture and ensure that it is protected. It's also important to hold all employees accountable. Many find that accountability of living and promoting the culture is best handled when it is part of the formal performance review process. Many companies no longer conduct annual reviews and instead do reviews monthly, quarterly, or at other frequencies. Think about how you will enforce your culture and hold people accountable. This is a journey and one that must be front and center each and every day for each and every person.

4. Metrics

Once you have identified what you want your culture norms to be, you will next determine a baseline or starting benchmark. This can be done through employee surveys, focus groups, and other feedback mechanisms that assess employees' perceptions of their workplace's culture.

- **Surveys:** Employee surveys are an excellent tool for gathering valuable feedback and establishing a baseline for workplace conditions. HR can begin by conducting an initial survey, followed by periodic surveys to reassess progress — for example, at three months, six months, nine months, and one year. Once a full year's baseline is set, surveys can be conducted every six months to maintain continuity. The key to effective surveys is to focus on three to five well-crafted questions that provide the critical insights needed for meaningful action. Some example prompts include:
 - *"At my company, I can say what I feel without fear of negative consequences."*
 - *"People in my company treat each other with kindness and respect."*
 - *"I'm treated fairly without regard to ethnicity, race, sex, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity."*
 - *"Leaders here would take a stand if someone were to behave with bias or in an offensive manner."*
 - *"In the past X months, I have observed or personally experienced verbal abuse or behaviors that discourage individuals from speaking up."*
 - *"In the past X months, I have witnessed rude or disrespectful behavior on the basis of ethnicity, race, sex, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity."*
- **Engagement Surveys:** Employers may incorporate additional questions into their regular [engagement surveys](#) instead of conducting a standalone employee survey. At the outset of the culture change process — or if no engagement survey has been completed in the past six months — distribute a survey with these added questions.

Follow up with another survey approximately one year after implementing the culture changes to measure progress.

Surveys can be distributed electronically or via pen and paper. Many organizations have transitioned to electronic surveys to streamline data collection and accelerate results. SHRM offers an [employee engagement survey](#) and also [provides a directory of companies](#) that offer online survey services.



- **Focus Groups:** Focus groups are another valuable tool for benchmarking the current workplace culture. Employers can select a random sample of employees to discuss their perceptions of civil and uncivil behaviors in the workplace. Begin by allowing team members to share their individual perspectives. Then, facilitate an open dialogue to identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

Ensure the discussion is participatory, creating an environment in which all voices are heard. By the conclusion of the session, aim to establish a shared understanding of civility and its importance in the workplace. The [Civil Conversations kit](#), a free resource created in partnership with SHRM and Rising Team, can help you lead a 30- to 60-minute team activity designed to foster this dialogue.

Now that you have established your current culture, what you want your desired culture to be, your baseline benchmark, and how you will determine progress, you need to convey that information to management and staff. Your next steps are:

1. Establish policies and straightforward guidelines.

Develop clear, companywide policies that outline expectations for respectful behavior and define standards for workplace civility. If your organization has existing policies in place, consider updating them to reflect current societal concerns.

2. Provide training for managers and supervisors.

Equip managers with the tools and training necessary to address difficult conversations, support employees who experience acts of incivility, and handle transgressions consistently and fairly. Encourage managers to keep open-door policies to foster an environment in which employees feel comfortable voicing concerns. This will enable managers to address individual acts of incivility before they escalate into larger workplace culture issues.

3. Empower employees with resources.

Ensure that your employees know how to report acts of incivility and access HR for support. Communicating these processes and proactively providing employees with resources demonstrates your company's commitment to fostering a respectful work environment and can enhance employees' sense of belonging and job satisfaction.

See [The Cost of Incivility: Addressing Workplace Challenges into 2025](#)



5. Communication

Introduction to Effective Communication and Civility in the Workplace

Effective communication is a cornerstone of organizational success, and leaders play a critical role in fostering an environment where civility thrives. It's not simply about sharing information, it's about setting a tone that encourages mutual respect, trust, and inclusivity. Leaders who communicate with civility create workplaces where all employees feel heard, valued, and empowered to contribute. Here are some key points for leaders striving to promote civility through communication:

- **Impact of Civil Communication:** Effective communication rooted in civility enhances employee morale, engagement, and understanding. Leaders who communicate respectfully create an environment where everyone feels like they belong, which boosts productivity and fosters a sense of shared purpose. A civil workplace promotes an open exchange of ideas in which employees feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of disrespect.
- **Leaders Setting the Tone:** Leaders set the tone for communication in the workplace. By modeling respectful, open communication, leaders promote civility and inclusivity across the organization. Clear, consistent communication, aligned with organizational values, fosters trust and ensures that all employees are on the same page. When leaders prioritize civility, it becomes embedded in the culture, reinforcing respect throughout the organization.
- **Two-Way Communication and Civility:** Communication is a two-way street. Leaders should not only share information but also actively listen to their employees. By paying attention to concerns, feedback, and suggestions, leaders create a culture of civility in which employees feel valued and understood. Active listening prevents misunderstandings and addresses concerns before they escalate, reinforcing trust and fostering a positive workplace environment.



- **Measuring the Impact of Communication:** Leaders should regularly assess how their communication is received and whether it fosters a civil, respectful atmosphere. Feedback and surveys can help gauge the effectiveness of messages and ensure they're aligned with the organization's goals of inclusivity and respect. This feedback loop enables leaders to refine their communication strategies to ensure they're creating an environment where civility thrives.
- **Tailoring Communication to Audiences:** Effective communication requires leaders to adapt their message to the audience. Whether delivering information through meetings, emails, or newsletters, leaders must consider how different employees receive and process messages. By selecting the appropriate communication method and being mindful of tone, leaders can ensure that their messages are not only clear but also respectful and considerate of diverse perspectives.
- **Training for Civility in Communication:** Leaders must be equipped with the skills needed to communicate respectfully and effectively. Providing communication training that emphasizes civility and respect enables leaders to handle difficult conversations with sensitivity and foster a more empathetic work environment. Training also teaches leaders how to respond to conflicts or misunderstandings in a way that upholds the principles of respect and fairness.
- **Responding to Employee Concerns:** When employees voice concerns, it's essential that leaders respond in a timely, respectful, and thoughtful manner. Addressing issues promptly shows that leaders value employee input and are committed to maintaining a civil workplace. This responsiveness fosters trust and demonstrates that leadership takes employee well-being seriously.
- **Creating Opportunity for All:** Leaders must ensure that their communication practices respect the diverse backgrounds of their employees. Being aware of cultural, individual, and generational differences allows leaders to communicate messages that promote civility and inclusivity at all levels of the organization. Leaders who prioritize empathy in their communication foster an environment in which all employees feel respected and valued.

By embedding these principles into daily leadership practices, leaders can create a workplace culture rooted in civility, respect, and collaboration. This culture not only improves employee satisfaction but also drives organizational success by fostering a workplace where every individual is empowered to contribute to the shared goals of the organization.

Resource: [Managing Organizational Communication toolkit](#)



6. Technology

Determine what technology is needed and how to use it. Will you have a dashboard, an app, a pulse meter, or something else? How and what will you measure? Then, how and what will you communicate to the executive team, people managers, and employees?

7. Celebrating Success

As you progress on the journey, it's important to celebrate the successful steps. Little celebrations go a long way on this journey.

8. Review and Reset

Establishing benchmarks and reset meetings is another important part of this journey. Once you have implemented your plan, quarterly reset meetings are very helpful. This allows you to track progress, determine where new challenges have arisen, and develop additional action steps needed to ensure success.

Most of all, embrace and enjoy the journey.



CIVILITY CULTURE CHECKLIST

✓	Key Element	Who Leads	Who's Involved	Comments
	Identify Future State	HR	CEO/Owner/ President	
	Define Current State	HR	Senior Leadership Team/Executive Team	
	Accountability	HR	Senior Leadership Team/Executive Team/People Managers	
	Metrics	HR	Senior Leadership Team/Executive Team	
	Communications	HR	Communications Team/Marketing Team	
	Technology	HR	IT Team	
	Celebrating Success	CEO/Owner/ President/HR	All	
	Review and Reset	HR	Senior Leadership Team/Executive Team	

THE PATH FORWARD

Now you understand the vital role a culture of civility plays in the workplace. Incivility is not merely an interpersonal issue — it carries substantial business consequences, including decreased productivity, higher turnover, and diminished employee engagement. The data is clear: Organizations that prioritize civility not only cultivate a more respectful environment but also experience tangible benefits in employee retention, collaboration, and overall workplace satisfaction.

Leaders play a crucial role in setting the standard for civility, and their commitment to modeling and enforcing respectful behavior is instrumental in driving meaningful cultural change. By aligning civility initiatives with business strategies, organizations can create workplaces that value transparency, fairness, and open communication.

The journey toward a more civil workplace is continuous. Establishing clear policies, providing leadership training, leveraging technology for measurement, and fostering open dialogue are essential steps in this process. Moreover, organizations must regularly assess and recalibrate their efforts, ensuring that civility remains a foundational pillar of their workplace culture.

By making civility a priority, organizations not only enhance employee well-being but also strengthen their reputations and position themselves for long-term success. A commitment to respect and inclusivity is not just a moral imperative — it's a strategic business necessity that benefits employees, leaders, and the organization as a whole.



RESOURCES

Tools

Civility Starter Kit

shrm.org/topics-tools/topics/civility

SHRM Employee Survey Sample Form

shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/forms/employee-survey-job-satisfaction

Civil Conversations kit

<https://app.risingteam.com/shrm-24>

SHRM Employment Engagement Survey

shrm.org/business-solutions/partner-products/employee-engagement-survey-service

Managing Organizational Communication Toolkit

shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-organizational-communication

Political Conversations Playbook

<https://flipbooks.shrm.org/view/1041257121/>

Insights

The Cost of Incivility: Addressing Workplace Challenges into 2025

shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/cost-of-incivility-addressing-workplace-challenges-into-2025

How to Promote Civility in the Workplace

shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/how-to-guides/how-to-promote-civility-in-the-workplace

4 Proactive Strategies to Combat Workplace Incivility

shrm.org/topics-tools/news/employee-relations/4-proactive-strategies-to-combat-workplace-incivility

Data

SHRM Benchmarking: Talent Access Report

shrm.org/topics-tools/research/shrm-benchmarking

SHRM Civility Index

shrm.org/topics-tools/topics/civility

The State of Global Workplace Culture in 2023

shrm.org/topics-tools/news/employee-relations/global-workplace-culture-research

This guide was developed and compiled by SHRM Community Experience.