play nice!

Christine Pearson and Christine Porath want you to treat people better— for the sake of the bottom line.

BY
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*W*ho has time for pleasantries? You'd better *make* time. According to two B-school professors, everyday indignities—rudeness, belittling others' efforts, cutting people out of communication loops—drive down productivity and drive good people out of the company altogether. In their new book, *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It* (Portfolio), Christine Pearson and Christine Porath present research depicting a corporate America in which almost everyone feels resentful and mistreated. Four of every five employees, they found, believe "they get no respect at work"; 48 percent claim to be "treated uncivilly at work *at least once per week*."

Pearson, professor of management at Thunderbird School of Global Management, and Porath, assistant professor of management at USC's Marshall School of Business, first made a splash in the late 1990s by bringing to prominence the issue of workplace incivility. They spent the next decade bolstering their case via surveys and focus groups—and learned that the state of workplace relations was worse than they originally thought and rapidly deteriorating.

For most companies, the economic climate couldn't be more different today than ten years ago, but Pearson insists that the issue of civility will have, if anything, more resonance than it did when budgets had room to spare. "All companies are looking for cost savings," she says, "and this is something they can do that doesn't require a financial investment. We're talking about a behavioral change—one that will have a real impact on the bottom line." And who wouldn't prefer to work for an organization where people are, well, nice?

Pearson and Porath spoke from their offices in, respectively, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

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WHEN YOU EXPLAIN YOUR WORK TO A NEW ACQUAINTANCE, DOES HE OR SHE IMMEDIATELY LAUNCH INTO A STORY OF PERSONAL GRIEVANCE? IT'S ALMOST IRRESISTIBLE.

Porath: Incivility runs across all industries, so absolutely *everyone* has their own story, which always makes for interesting conversations on the plane or in the classroom or anywhere else.

Pearson: Everyone not only wants to tell us their personal story of what they've experienced and what they've witnessed—they also want to lay claim to being in the industry that is the most uncivil. Whether we're talking to doctors or lawyers or journalists or mechanics or military people or teachers, they all claim that they are in the most uncivil industry. And after a decade of research, it certainly seems that some are more uncivil than others, but I don't know that any can actually lay claim to being number one. There are plenty of negative stories to go around.

YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO RANK THEM?

Pearson: No. Well, not yet.

I GUESS IT'S BETTER FOR YOUR WORK THAT THERE ARE NO COMPLETELY CIVIL INDUSTRIES.

Pearson: That's probably true. And, of course—with self-selection bias—if we were making that list, I'd be inclined to put higher education at the top of it.

> *Victims of incivility are taken off track cognitively. They don't focus on their tasks as well. They don't perform as well. They're not as creative.*

AT THE BEGINNING OF *THE COST OF BAD BEHAVIOR*, **YOU LIST TWENTY-FOUR EXAMPLES OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY, FROM THROWING TEMPER TANTRUMS AND CHECKING E-MAIL DURING MEETINGS TO FAILING TO RETURN PHONE CALLS AND SHOWING IRRITATION WHEN ASKED FOR FAVORS. BY THOSE STANDARDS, AN AWFUL LOT OF US QUALIFY. ARE YOU DEFINING INCIVILITY OVERLY BROADLY?**

Pearson: We're looking at things that are low-intensity, that are short of physical encounters, and there are many bad behaviors that are *not* on the list. The defining point for us was to name all this as incivility.

Porath: People in both the academic and practical worlds gravitate toward the term because they have experienced incivility, and they're not as picky about how to define it in terms of what gets counted and what doesn't.

Pearson: You know it when you see it.

HOW MUCH INCIVILITY IS CONSCIOUS? PRESUMABLY, ALMOST EVERYONE RECOGNIZES WHEN THEY'RE *TARGETS* **OF INCIVILITY. BUT DO MOST OFFENDERS REALIZE THAT THEY'VE OFFENDED?**

Pearson: Often, the targeted person interprets it as intentional, but what's interesting is that people who watch it happen—from an unbiased third-party perspective—often aren't sure whether it was intentional or not. And this is what makes incivility so pervasive, because the offender can always back off and say, "Hey, I was just kidding around; I didn't really mean it; why are you so thin-skinned? Why do you take offense at everything?" It can become a really damaging cycle for the target.

Porath: In surveying, we don't have a problem getting people to admit that they in fact are offenders from time to time. But in the moment, people don't admit it. And even when they do, they come up with rationales. Almost half claim that they have no time to be nice—which actually makes a lot of sense considering how stressed people are today. And over a quarter of offenders essentially blame the company—they say there are no company guidelines for how people treat one another, and they've received no training in it. A quarter also say they're rude because the company leaders are disrespectful.

OF COURSE, PLENTY OF TOP EXECUTIVES ARE NOTORIOUSLY ABRASIVE. IS INCIVILITY IN PART A BYPRODUCT OF THE STYLE THAT GOT THEM WHERE THEY ARE?

Pearson: It's not only a byproduct—people have a natural tendency to reinforce behavior that is rewarded, and what we have found over the years is that sometimes people attribute their success to their style. Then other people see the behavior of those who have climbed the corporate ladder and make the connection. That's why it's particularly devastating when the incivility in an organization is coming from above—people are likely to emulate that style in their own behavior.

YOU SURVEYED PEOPLE WHO CONSIDER THEMSELVES VICTIMS OF INCIVILITY AND ASKED HOW THEY RESPONDED IN THE WORKPLACE, AND NEARLY HALF SAID THEY INTENTIONALLY DECREASED THEIR TIME AND EFFORT AT WORK. WAS THAT THE MOST STARTLING NUMBER YOU CAME ACROSS?

Pearson: Actually, the really shocking figure to me was the turnover—the idea that 12 percent of the people will actually leave their jobs because of incivility. Remember that incivility is low-intensity—it's not like somebody threatened these people or pushed them around literally or figuratively within the office. And the organization may never know why there's turnover, because people never report incivility as the reason. Even if they're in an organization that's forward-thinking enough to do exit interviews, they don't say why—it's a small world, so the offender may catch up with them somewhere later in their career or may try to smudge their record. And they don't want to be seen as weaklings.

Porath: That turnover number is high, but it doesn't capture the full effect: We've also run studies that look at lost time and effort. Victims of incivility are taken off track cognitively. They don't focus on their tasks as well. They don't perform as well. They're not as creative. And incivility tends to take not just the one victim off track—there are the people they talk to, the teammates figuring out what to do about it, and the managers who have to deal with it. If you start adding up the time costs, it rises really quickly. And then there are people intentionally getting even in some way.

THAT—REVENGE—IS WHAT SHOULD REALLY MAKE PEOPLE ANXIOUS. YOU FOUND THAT 94 PERCENT OF TARGETS GET EVEN WITH THEIR OFFENDERS, WHICH IS SCARY FOR THOSE OF US WHO SPREAD RUMORS OR BULLY SUBORDINATES OR LEAVE SNIPPY VOICE-MAIL MESSAGES.

Porath: We hope that people think a little bit about that. There's an assumption that if you have power you get away with incivility, but you probably won't. I can't tell you how often people tell us, "It's not that I wasn't going to get even—I just was going to be smart about how and when."

Pearson: Revenge is often done in unmeasured or maybe even immeasurable ways, and the original offender may miss it altogether. We hear about sabotaging and abusing equipment and that kind of thing, but even more we hear about not covering the boss's back, not passing on information—that kind of thing. The get-back actions or revenge-type actions can be things that are missed, but they are quite costly in terms of the offender's productivity and image within the organization.

NOW, YOU STARTED OUT STUDYING WORKPLACE HOMICIDE—WHICH I SUPPOSE QUALIFIES AS _EXTREME_ INCIVILITY.

Pearson: I was working in organizational crisis management and trying to define precursors to workplace homicide. Organizations were becoming concerned about the "avenger syndrome," and my initial goal was to find some signals that might help us better understand homicide within organizational contexts. That didn't pan out, but there was so much resonance among people that it became its own stream of research. Homicide is a really rare occurrence, while incivility happens to all of us on too frequent a basis.

AND THE FREQUENCY KEEPS RISING—YOU POLLED WORKERS IN 1998 AND THEN AGAIN IN 2005, AND THE NUMBER WHO SAID THEY WERE TREATED RUDELY AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK NEARLY DOUBLED. SHOULD WE BE EXPECTING A WAVE OF WORKPLACE SHOOTINGS?

Pearson: I don't want to go on record saying yes! There's a connection between incivility and homicide, but I don't think that we're set for a wave of homicides.

I SHOULDN'T HAVE ASKED.

Pearson: That's OK. I do think that incivility is still on the rise, given stress levels and the environment that businesses are operating in.

Porath: If we did a new poll, I'm sure the numbers would have risen from 2005. But I hope there's no rise in violence.

MOST OF YOUR EXAMPLES ARE OF PEOPLE BEING RUDE FACE TO FACE. BUT ISN'T DISTANCE PART OF THE PROBLEM—THAT WE NOW COMMUNICATE VIA E-MAIL RATHER THAN IN PERSON?

Pearson: Sure. To me, one of the biggest offenders is the use of e-mail when you should pick the phone up or, better yet, walk twenty paces to the next office and deal with the person face to face. But one of the things that I'm giving thought to right now is that it's not the media or the increase in technological tools that are causing the incivility—it's that people can use those as tools if they're not thinking about being civil. Some people use the easiest tool to be uncivil and are very aware of that. You dash off a loaded e-mail, you don't have to look at the person, and you don't have to get a response that might be painful to you. For some people, it is absolutely purposeful.

THEY'RE NOT JUST CONFLICT-AVERSE?

Pearson: It's not either/or. I can tell you of conversations and interviews I've done with people who zap someone an e-mail recognizing that the e-mail has the potential of being offensive, and they don't care because they don't have to deal with it one on one. They would not send the same message if they had to do it face to face.

NOW, OBVIOUSLY, DEALING WITH INTERPERSONAL RUDENESS IS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR VICTIMS. BUT TO A LOT OF CORPORATE LEADERS, IT ALL MUST SEEM AWFULLY *SOFT*.

Porath: When we started studying this a decade ago, that absolutely was the case. That's why we tried to gather the most objective data we could on people reducing efforts and leaving the organization. You had to show them the numbers, that it was hitting the bottom line. But there's been a really interesting shift. Whether we're teaching exec-education courses with doctors or working with top law firms or the Microsofts of the world, they believe strongly that this matters a lot. People are pounding on our door and saying, "But it's going on here too." And at least some leaders are trying to get their arms around it and create better programs in the workplace; they recognize just how detrimental incivility can be.

DO THEY EVER TRY TO DEFEND THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THE WAY IT IS?

Porath: I haven't gotten a lot of that, actually. I mean, I have friends in different industries—for example, investment banking—who describe bosses who throw computers on a semi-daily basis, and that's the norm for how those places operate, but they recognize it's a problem.

Pearson: When we do get pushback from senior executives, the two most common rationales are, "That's how we compete" and, "You've got to be tough to make it in this organization." I find the best way to deal with that is to take them back to a time when they were on the receiving end of it. And it doesn't take more than a few minutes of conversation or speaking to an audience. I'll start out with my spiel about why this is important, and I'll get some glazed looks—until I say something like, if it's to attorneys, "Remember the days when you were a law clerk" or, for doctors, "Remember when you were a resident" or, within our own industry, "Think back

to when you were a doctoral student," and that connects immediately. We've all been there at some stage in our careers. And you can say not only, "Do you remember what it felt like to be a victim of incivility?" but, "Do you remember what your productivity was like at that time?"

I WONDER WHETHER YOUR STANDARD HARD-NOSED CEO, IN THESE TOUGH TIMES, FEELS COMFORTABLE TAKING THIS ISSUE BACK TO HIS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE—ASKING THAT EVERYONE PLAY NICE.

Pearson: Well, yeah, when what's on the table in that conference room is *How are we going to survive?*, this becomes a secondary or tertiary issue. But you can say, "Guess what, folks—I've run some numbers, and it's costing us potentially millions of bucks to not deal with how our own employees are treating each other." I think you get people's attention instantly with that sort of an argument.

Porath: The numbers argument is a hard one to refute. You can do the math quickly. If you're a law firm, you can estimate how much a particular partner's bad behavior is costing you just in terms of turnover. The tougher cost to estimate—but it's just as important—is in reputation. That partner's behavior may make it harder to get the top young guns from the best law schools.

PLUS, YOU NOTE THAT EMPLOYEES TALK TO PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE OFFICE ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON INSIDE. HOW MUCH DOES AN INTERNAL CULTURE OF INCIVILITY AFFECT A COMPANY'S REPUTATION?

Porath: A lot, especially with the Web. People can relate their experiences quickly and reach big numbers, and customers may decide not to back the product and may take on negative attitudes about the employees, the firm, the brand even. In our research, I found that really surprising, because customers weren't the ones technically being affected by the incivility. They were just witnessing it unfold.

AND WHEN YOU DISCUSS WITNESSING IN THE BOOK, YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT INCIVILITY BEING SEEN NOT JUST BY CUSTOMERS BUT BY OTHER EMPLOYEES, RIGHT?

Pearson: It doesn't have to be literally witnessing—it can happen on the grapevine. Even hearing about it affects people's attention, their ability to collaborate, the amount of time that they're focused versus distracted. It has broad-reaching effects.

ONE OF THE REASONS YOU CITE FOR RISING INCIVILITY IS THAT WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS HAVE BECOME TRANSACTIONAL RATHER THAN LOYALTY-BASED, "SO CIVILITY CAN SEEM LIKE A GIANT WASTE OF TIME." BUT WITH WORK AND WORKPLACES CONTINUING TO SHIFT, ISN'T IT MORE LIKELY NOW THAT WORKERS WILL ENCOUNTER EACH OTHER AGAIN UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES? I WOULD THINK THAT EVERYONE WOULD STRIVE TO STAY ON GOOD TERMS.

Pearson: I wonder how many people actually recognize that. I'm ever amazed at the things that people do in terms of burning bridges, not recognizing that the world is shrinking and you're more likely now than in the past to encounter those people again. Most people don't seem to think that far ahead or recognize that severing or tainting those connections can come back to haunt them in the future.

NOW, THE BOOK DISCUSSES A FEW COMPANIES IN PARTICULAR, INCLUDING CISCO—THE FIRST CORPORATION TO INSTITUTE A FORMAL PROGRAM FOCUSED ON CIVILITY. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT?

Pearson: Someone from Cisco was in an executive-education class when we were preaching

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about this, took it to heart, and had the insight and savvy and power within the company to catch people's attention. It wasn't like Chris and I had been called into Cisco to do a consulting project—it came because of a believer who had read our research and took it to the workforce within Cisco, and people there in high-powered positions bought into it and said, "We believe in this." It was a pretty civil place to begin with—it wasn't like they were having high turnover or were having a lot of disgruntled employees complaining about the way they were treated and so forth—so extra kudos to them.

YOU GO ON TO TALK ABOUT STARBUCKS AND SOUTHWEST, WHICH ARE VERY DIFFERENT COMPANIES THAT BOTH SEEM TO HAVE ESTABLISHED AND MAINTAINED CULTURES OF CIVILITY.

Porath: If it's important to the company, it's in their mission statement, and they're setting expectations, and they're recruiting and selecting based on that value. Starbucks pours a lot of money into training and then follows through in terms of evaluating people, based on whether they are living up to their values—and respect is one of those values. The important thing is to make this an important and consistent theme throughout what we call the human-resources cycle.

Pearson: The second thing that has to happen is that the executives themselves—from the very top—must behave in a way that is impeccably civil. In working with executive groups, I've often seen that they treat their direct reports civilly but don't treat each other civilly! And people see that, people sense that, people hear that in the conference room and see it in the executives' eyes when they're interacting with each other. These things are not missed by others within the organization.

> *I can point to lots of organizations that made the tough decision not to hire a superstar because of the reputation that preceded him or her. There's a lot at risk, particularly if you're bringing in somebody at a senior level.*

OF COURSE, A COMPANY CAN'T DO MUCH ABOUT WHAT GOES ON OUTSIDE ITS WALLS; YOU WRITE, "IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE SOCIETY'S CULTURAL LEANING TOWARD DISRESPECT AND DISREGARD." DO YOU SEE SPILLOVER BETWEEN PEOPLE'S PERSONAL LIVES AND WORK LIVES WHEN IT COMES TO HOW THEY TREAT OTHERS?

Pearson: Oh, sure. We've got data on that. People take the repercussions of the incivilities they witness and experience home with them. Rather than pushing back at your boss or taking it out on your colleague or somebody on a lower level, you hit the dog, yell at your wife, scream at your kids.

Porath: It works in the opposite direction too. The organization Operation Respect found that 60 percent of American teenagers witness uncivil events every day, which doesn't bode well for when people get into the workplace. Managers we interview say, "We can't do anything about people arriving here without the norms for respect."

AND YOU ARGUE THAT COMPANIES SHOULD WORK TO KEEP OUT UNCIVIL PEOPLE IN THE FIRST PLACE, AND YOU EMPHASIZE BACKGROUND CHECKS. BUT THIS SEEMS LIKE THE KIND OF THING THAT WOULDN'T NORMALLY COME UP IN A REFERENCE CALL. ARE PEOPLE WILLING TO TELL SOMEONE WHO TELEPHONES, "THIS PERSON WAS RUDE TO ME?"

Pearson: When we make that recommendation to an audience or a focus group, people say, "I can't do that—all we're ever going to get is name and dates of employment." But if you tap into your professional network when you do the telephoning, to dig a little deeper, will people tell you? Absolutely, they will. You go to people you know who have worked with that individual or who worked for the organization. Maybe you're not going to get specifics, because

people want to be careful about how they categorize folks, but you can get a sense of whether this is a good person to work with. There are lots of ways to ask that question: Is this a respectful colleague? Does the individual tend to have temper tantrums? I can point to lots of organizations that made the tough decision not to hire a superstar because of the reputation that preceded him or her. There's a lot at risk, particularly if you're bringing in somebody at a senior level.

THE BOOK CITES SEVERAL EXAMPLES OF CEOs WHO CRASHED AND BURNED BECAUSE OF THEIR PERSONALITIES, AND IN RETROSPECT THEIR FLAWS SEEM OBVIOUS—EVERYONE HATED THEM, PEOPLE WERE RELIEVED WHEN THEY LEFT, THE STOCK PRICE ROSE UPON THEIR DEPARTURE. BUT DID NO ONE KNOW WHAT THESE PEOPLE WERE REALLY LIKE BEFORE THEY WERE HIRED?

Pearson: I think people get starstruck, and if they have a chance to bring in a rainmaker or somebody what's going to have the next great idea in the industry, they don't necessarily do the deeper work. And we see hiring practices that are just stupid. I can think of one case where the person was a disaster from the perspective of incivility: The company used the same firm to do the background check as it had used to find the candidate. Well, what kind of a report did they think they were going to get on this person?

Porath: I can think of examples from several different industries: We've worked with law firms in which someone has been a rainmaker and brought in so much business that everyone says, "We have to live with this." But then, doing the numbers on what keeping that person was costing the firm—in terms of the effect on the culture and people leaving—they decided, "We've got to rein him in or get rid of him." Administrators at a hospital really regretted not doing due diligence on the front end of bringing in a star, and it cost them millions because of potential lawsuits and to get rid of that star. And in the book, we talk about one Fortune 50 firm that decided not to promote a couple of people into the C-suite because it wasn't worth it.

LAST: YOU'VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS TOGETHER A LONG TIME, AND SURELY ONCE IN A WHILE ONE OF YOU FAILS TO RESPOND TO AN E-MAIL OR TAKES TOO MUCH CREDIT FOR SOMETHING OR FORGETS TO SAY, "THANK YOU." SO TELL ME: WHICH OF YOU IS THE MEAN ONE?

Pearson: That's a new question for us! You know, we both have reputations for being very uncivil people, and our colleagues all say, "Here we go—the shoemaker's children."

Porath: It is hard doing research in the topic—you have to catch yourself when you want to give a student a zinger. At least, I feel worse about it when it happens.

Pearson: Especially because I say, "Look to your role models." I just got back from speaking in the Middle East, and my projector kept dying in front of the audience. It was one of the worst technological-support situations I've ever had, and it kept happening every day. It never got repaired; it was one malfunction after another. And by day three, I was standing in front of the executive group thinking, "OK, I have to just keep smiling at the technological-support people because that attitude is part of what I'm bringing." It can be a real challenge. But honestly, it's fundamentally part of our persona for both of us that this is really important; it was even before we began studying it. Maybe it was our upbringing.

SO YOU'RE SAYING YOU'RE NATURALLY NICE, NOT JUST PROFESSIONALLY.

Pearson: I'm saying we think it's important to be naturally nice. Whether we achieve it is in the eyes of the beholders, so you can give us your rundown.

Porath: And that's an empirical question, you know.

I'M GOING TO GO DOWN THAT LIST OF TWENTY-FOUR ITEMS AND SEE HOW YOU DO.

Porath: Let us know. ∎