YOU’RE A MEAN ONE, MR. GRINCH:
A HUMAN SYSTEMS ANALYSIS OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

By

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You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch

Introduction

“[This organization] lost a really good employee who cared a lot about this place. And the sad thing is, it didn’t have to happen.” This is a direct quote from my own exit interview with the human resources director at the organization at which I worked for nine years. Despite my best efforts to hold them back, tears streamed down my face as I recounted the mistreatment I experienced at the hands of my newly-hired boss: her condescending tone, the eye rolls, and the constant reminders about my good salary that were intended to imply I was not earning it.

Despite an initial “honeymoon period,” shortly after my boss was hired, the work environment became one that was wrought with anxiety, closed office doors, and a frenetic energy that appeared directly correlated to a fear of displeasing our new leader. This was in stark contrast to the sense of camaraderie the team shared prior to her arrival.

I went to therapy regularly to try to cope with what was becoming an unbearable situation. I suffered from anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Most evenings, I would come home from work and complain to my husband about my day, creating what he later referred to as a black cloud over our home. My unhappiness was no secret to our two children; it was clear: mommy was not happy. When my pre-teen son said, “You used to think your boss was the bomb diggity, but now she’s just the bomb!” it provided a moment of levity, but also made me wonder: What was the damage from the shrapnel of that bomb?
Literature Review

As I began researching literature on the workplace phenomenon that correlated most with my personal experience, I grappled with what search terms to use. Was it workplace dysfunction? Was I bullied? Or, could it be that I was the target of what one Stanford professor so eloquently describes as an asshole: someone who targets those of a less powerful status, and makes them feel “oppressed, humiliated, de-energized, or belittled” (Sutton, 2007, p. 9).

I then came across the term workplace incivility, something that Andersson and Pearson (1999) define as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (p. 457). Examples of uncivil behavior in the workplace include sarcasm, hostile stares, the silent treatment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), disrespect, social exclusion (Cortina et al, 2001), talking down to others, withholding information, and taking credit for someone else’s efforts (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

Research shows incivility is running rampant in the workplace, which translates to high costs for organizations. According to Pearson and Porath (2009), much of the estimated $300 billion in annual costs to U.S. corporations due to job stress stems largely from workplace incivility (p.4). Despite these costs, Pearson and Porath (2005) report that some managers sweep uncivil work behavior under the rug because they don’t want to get involved in interpersonal conflicts, or discount their importance as personal matters.
Purpose and Relevance of this Research

During the timeframe that I experienced what I now recognize as workplace incivility, I was enrolled in my first semester of a two-year master’s program in organization development (OD). I was so inspired by what I was learning about good leadership, and how to create more productive and humane workplaces. But the cognitive dissonance between what I was learning in the classroom and my nine to five reality became too much, so I quit.

As I continued through the OD graduate program, and ultimately found another job, I often wondered what others’ experiences were with incivility at work. How did it impact them? Did it spill over into their family life? But perhaps my biggest question was this: What role can OD practitioners play in identifying and combating workplace incivility? These curiosities guided my research.
Methodology

Design

I conducted personal interviews with six self-identified targets of workplace incivility, as well as their family members. Four targets were women and two were men. They ranged in ages from 32 to 58, held positions that spanned from coordinator to regional vice president, and represented the industries of healthcare, higher education, workers compensation insurance, and engineering management.

Since my research also examines the spillover of workplace incivility into the home, I interviewed the four spouses and two domestic partners of each of the six targets, as well as two adult daughters of two different female targets. The women, ages 18 and 23 years, both lived at home during the timeframe in which their moms experienced incivility at work.

I employed a qualitative phenomenological design, examining and placing value on the first person point of view and how my interview subjects interpreted, described, and made sense of their experiences.

Limitations

Since I have been a target of workplace incivility, I have a strong bias and passion for the topic. As such, the way I interpret data and present my findings is through the lens of someone who has been on the receiving end of workplace incivility, which has its limitations.

A Human Systems Approach

My research examines workplace incivility using Eisen’s Human Systems Redesign (HSR) framework (1995), which is shown in Figure 1. Eisen suggests that when working with various configurations of human beings, one must take into account a complex interdependence among several levels of human systems: 1) The person as a whole individual; 2) the person’s
own internal dynamics and **sub selves**; 3) the **interperson**, which is composed of any two-person relationship; 4) the **family**; 5) the **group**; 6) the **organization**; 7) the **community** of stakeholders in which organizations exists; and 8) the **society** of all human beings on the planet (p.2).

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**Figure 1: The Human Systems Model**

I will use the human systems framework to examine the impact of workplace incivility, changing the figural human system throughout to explore the impact of workplace incivility on six of eight distinct nested human systems within the HSR framework.
Findings and Discussion

Figure as Interperson: How Does Incivility Show up Between Individuals at Work?

For me, it was that visceral cringe that happened as soon as I learned my boss was hired. When she was in her previous position, I had read news articles about her that reported what many perceived as a domineering management style that led to the exiting of many long-time employees in her department. I tried to remain optimistic, but it didn’t take long to realize that history could very well repeat itself at my workplace.

Each of the six targets I interviewed reported that they, too, experienced the early warning signs of workplace incivility. In the case of one target, that red flag came as early as the job offer:

When [my boss called to offer me the job], she said, “That was a really terrible interview. I’m not sure you can do this job. I think you’re too nice; I think you’re too weak, but I don’t have anybody better so I’m going to hire you anyway. But, if you don’t do well, you won’t pass probation.” That right there, was the start of it. And it pretty much went on like that for two-and-a-half years.

In all cases but one, the instigators of the incivility were the direct supervisors of the targets I interviewed. Targets said their bosses criticized, micromanaged, intimidated, dismissed, ignored, publically embarrassed, excluded, spoke in condescending tones, and generally offered no support or mentoring.

“I just couldn’t do anything right or anything good enough,” said one target. Another said, “His way of communicating was usually by either embarrassing you in front of a group of people or being insulting or condescending to let you know that you were not doing something right.” Uncivil behavior even spilled into non-work hours: “[She sent] really condescending e-mails always questioning every decision I made,” said one target. “It got to the point where all weekend long I was getting texted nonstop.”
Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2000) found that incivility “can be the starting point for social interaction that leads to more overt acts of workplace aggression” (p. 123). One target shared a time when her supervisor slammed the door in her face, while another explained what happened when she finally reached her breaking point:

I couldn’t stand it any longer and I just thought, I don’t have anything to lose. I [told her], “Your communication is hostile, it’s destructive, it’s critical, it’s unproductive, it’s not serving anybody. You’re not acting like a real supervisor who can be supportive. I was hoping you could mentor me and I could learn things, but all you can do is put me down.” She was really mad; she was quiet, but her eyelid was quivering.

**Figure as Person: What Impact Does Incivility Have on the Target?**

Targets experienced a range of health issues related to the stress brought on by workplace incivility. Half of those I interviewed required medication to cope. One target said, “My blood pressure was so high that my doctor [said], ‘Instead of prescribing a pill, how about I prescribe you to take time off work?’” Another confided, “I had trouble with my stomach so I had to get medication. My doctor wanted to put me on medication for anxiety and depression. Twice I went to my doctor about physical symptoms, but the doctor said, ‘This is stress.’”

Four of the six targets I interviewed admitted they “self medicated,” using alcohol as a way to cope at the end of a long day: “I had a two drink minimum every night,” said one young mother. “I would get [my son] in the bath and would be drinking my second glass of wine. . . . It was definitely like I felt like I needed it.”

All but one target gained between 20 to 40 pounds while they were experiencing incivility at work. “I needed to eat right and exercise, but there was just no way,” said one target, adding, “I would just crawl in the door and eat what my husband made for dinner and crawl into bed.” Another said the stress had the opposite effect on her:
Physically, I lost a lot of weight. I could not live up to the performance expectations. I was double checking myself on everything I did. I got to the point where I didn’t have time to eat or drink at work.

One target shared an episode her doctor attributed to stress-induced high blood pressure:

At one point I actually lost vision in my left eye and had to get people out of my office and close the door and pray to calm down. I thought I was just going to have a heart attack right there because of the pressure to perform and the lack of support. My doctor said, “You either have to cope with your circumstances or change your circumstances.”

Five of the six targets I interviewed did voluntarily change their circumstances, decisions that came at a price: two took significantly lower paying positions in their current workplaces and one quit without another job lined up. Another retired five years early, despite feeling that she was at the top of her game professionally: “I would have loved to do my job for a long time. . . . but I couldn’t stand anymore of it.”

**Figure as Sub Selves: The Inner Critic, the Imposter, and the Ringmaster**

Workplace incivility can cause targets to experience “significant distress, due to difficulty in making sense of the situation, indecisiveness about whether or how to respond, and uncertainty about what could happen next” (Lim et al, 2008, p. 96). This can wreak havoc on a target’s sub selves, “the inner world of sub-identities and related intrapersonal dynamics and structures” (Eisen, 1995).

Targets shared that their experiences with workplace incivility did indeed create an inner world of self-doubt. One revealed, “It made me question myself in areas where I felt very competent. Am I doing this wrong? Do I really not know what I’m doing? Am I not a good leader?” Another shared, “I started to watch the one gal [with whom my boss] didn’t have problems. I started to watch how she asked questions, and I started to pattern my question asking after her. [I thought] I must not ask the questions in the right way.”
One target felt like she was a failing ringmaster in her own life:

The circus was kind of everywhere because my family was going through a really challenging time and that was creating a lot of demands on us as parents . . . and then I’m at work and I’m dealing with a dysfunctional workplace there. . . . Do you ever use that thing, what’s the common denominator? I started to feel like it was me; I really, truly did.

In interviewing two of my subjects, I picked up on a sub self that was all too familiar to me: the inner critic. When I was experiencing incivility at work, I remember feeling I had to justify to others what I was experiencing at work was not my fault; deep down I feared others would think that I was responsible or that I really was incompetent. After sharing the impact that an uncivil work environment had not only on her, but also her colleagues, one target clarified, “I don’t want you to think it was just me weak, whining, and complaining.” Another said, “If you even look at my LinkedIn profile, I have a lot of recommendations that show I’m not this [person I was painted to be].”

**Figure as Group: How Does Incivility in the Workplace Impact a Team?**

Workplace incivility had a significant impact on the departments and work teams of the targets I interviewed. One said:

[Our boss] would talk bad about other directors to other people, and it started to [make you think], “Wow this person is saying bad things, unprofessional things to me, what is she saying about me to other people?” People started to put barriers up because there was this kind of questioning [whether] people are saying bad things behind my back. . . . It was just so fast. In a year’s time, we [went from having] a great team, and now you didn’t know who would throw you under the bus.

Uncivil behavior came out in departmental meetings as well, as one target recalled, “There were numerous staff meetings where I was reminded that my responsibilities were mine alone, and that I was to sink or swim by myself and I was not to receive any other help from anyone else.” Another said, “In meetings, [our boss] would just slam people in really
unprofessional ways. You were afraid to say something, but then you didn’t want to say nothing."

In my own situation, each of the five original members of our department resigned within a year and a half from the day our new boss took the helm; I was the second to leave. Four of the targets I interviewed said their teams experienced mass exoduses as well. One shared:

Of the four of us [regional vice presidents], two were demoted, one had a nervous breakdown, and I left. . . . My manager lost 100 years of experience because she was so bad and nobody stopped her. That has an impact. And maybe it doesn’t show up in the bottom line, but it shows up in morale.

**Figure as Organization: Doing Nothing Says Something About Organizational Culture**

Schein (2010) says, “At the core of every culture are assumptions about the proper way for individuals to relate to each other to make the group safe, comfortable, and productive” (p. 149). He adds, “it is possible to reconstruct how norms of behavior arise through what members do or do not do when critical incidents occur” (p. 218).

Many of the targets I interviewed said their employers did not do enough to stop the critical incidents of incivility they experienced. Schein’s work would suggest that this turning a blind eye can breed a culture of incivility based on what is being “communicated” when nothing is done.

“Nobody was asking me what do you need to succeed,” said one target. “When [my co-worker] went out on stress leave, I thought someone would notice.” Another shared:

[My supervisor’s boss] told me that [I needed] to make [the relationship with my supervisor] work. He said, “I suspect she can be fairly difficult.” [When I told him], “Oh it’s been difficult,” he goes, “I don’t want to know how the sausage is made, I just want the sausage.”
Targets shared that their human resources departments offered little to no support. “Our HR manager was pretty useless,” recalled one target. “Her response was, “It must be awful to have to work with somebody like that.”” Another said:

I asked [the vice president of human resources] for an exit interview. She made an appointment to talk to me, but she didn’t show up for it. They knew [my supervisor was] a problem, but they didn’t want to deal with it.

My subjects shared that they felt let down by the lack of support they received by those in their organizations who had the power and position to have made a difference:

I really did feel alone. I didn’t feel as though there was really much hope because, from my perspective, the administration didn’t address the issues that I knew [another employee who quit] had raised at all. I thought if [she] goes and there’s no change, and I’m using HR and every tool I could except for filing a grievance, how can I really expect it to change?

**Figure as Family: When Workplace Incivility Hits Home**

Bennis says that events of incivility at work are “more than little hurts [or] irritations; they’re more like little deaths” (Pearson & Porath, 2009, p. x). One domestic partner I interviewed said that when her partner would arrive home from work,

it was just like she was beaten down. When someone tells you on a regular basis that you’re no good, it’s demeaning, even if you have self-confidence. This person is your boss; she totally has power over you. It’s just hard to get out from under it. It’s really repressive . . . and she manifested that.

Spouses shared that their loved ones were more disconnected from the family. “[When he got home from work] he would just go straight into the bedroom and start watching TV,” said one wife.” A husband shared that his wife “was definitely more withdrawn . . . I think she was overwhelmed. Everything else was just overload.”

Workplace incivility dominated household conversations: “I felt like [her boss] became a member of our family because there was so much discussion, and I felt like it was a real
invasion,” said one domestic partner. One husband reflected, “We couldn’t go any place without, ‘You know what else I forgot to tell you?’ And so that became really hard to balance.” One 18-year-old daughter spoke about the impact incivility had on meal time conversations, saying, “Sometimes we’d be at dinner and my brother would be like, ‘Mom, you always talk about work now. Why can’t I ever say anything?’”

A husband said that incivility at work caused his wife to overcompensate on the job by working longer hours, which impacted their three-year-old son: “[Our son would wake up] in the morning and would have a fit because mommy would be gone. There were many morning fits getting him ready for school.”

The daughters I interviewed were older and better able to articulate their feelings than a three-year-old. Yet something tells me their feelings were similar: “We’re kids. We want to talk to our mom about things and [get her] input,” said one daughter. “She was so inside her own head [that] she wouldn’t think about what we’re thinking; my mom’s never been that way.” Another daughter confided, “She couldn’t be that person for me at that point. It made me feel terrible. I wanted my mom.”

**Conclusion**

**What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You a Stronger OD Practitioner**

I was the last person to leave the office on my last day. It was eight o’clock at night on the Friday before Christmas, and my head was still aching from the emotional intensity of my exit interview earlier in the day. It was bittersweet leaving my job of nine years under the circumstances. When I put the key in the ignition to drive out of the parking lot for the very last time, “What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger” was playing on the radio. It was followed by “You’re A Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” and “I Knew You Were Trouble When You Walked In,”
a playlist I was convinced was sent from the heavens as a sign that I made the right decision by leaving.

Now that I am nearly two years down that road, my perspective has broadened. It’s easy to focus on The Grinch and stay mired in the interpersonal aspects of workplace incivility. But as Eisen states, when consulting with organizations, it is important to attend to not only the “presenting” organizational problem, but also the background (S. Eisen, personal communication, February 20, 2014). He adds, “Only by shifting one’s point of view, by standing outside the situation in some way, can the larger picture be apprehended. . . . This is probably the source of the most powerful contributions of any consultant – the fresh perspective of the outsider” (Eisen, 1995, p. 9).

OD practitioners are in a unique position to consult with clients about the significant impact that workplace incivility can have on organizations, teams, employees, and the family systems that support employees. By helping organizations identify workplace incivility and understand its impact on a systemic level, we can play an important role in creating more civil and humane workplaces. That is a role I will relish.
References


