**FIRMS CAN DO MORE THAN JUST PROVIDING TIME OFF**

# How incivility in the family can affect work performance

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We're often told, "Don't bring your home problems to the office", or conversely, to not bring work stresses home. But in today's era of multitasking, flexible working and 24/7 contact, is it really that easy to draw a line between our work and home lives?

I have spent several years researching the impact incivility has on our professional lives and on business productivity. Incivility — non-violent, rude or disrespectful behaviour — can take numerous forms and its effects on those who receive it can vary widely. An act that one individual may simply brush off and forget, for example, may cause deep psychological pain to another.

While we generally dismiss uncivil behaviour from people we do not know, we seldom think about the consequences of family incivility on job performance. Incivility includes sarcasm, shouting at or demeaning someone, or ignoring them altogether, but this does not necessarily imply an intention to cause hurt.

In the workplace, incivility can be governed by written policies and sanctions — in corporate human resource policies and personnel contracts, for example. However, in a family situation, expectations about the norms of behaviour are more implicit than formal. As a result, family members may have different perceptions of where the boundaries lie or what is considered "acceptable" or "forgivable" — sometimes even perpetuating negative behaviour within the family.

From a business perspective, there has been a growing understanding in recent years of the importance of employee well-being, stress-management and zero-tolerance policies towards workplace abuse. Yet, surprisingly few employers try to understand or address how family issues and tensions such as incivility at home can affect employee performance. Indeed, supervisors have a tendency to see such issues as relatively harmless and less deserving of sympathy.

In a study I conducted involving more than 200 employees in Singapore, I found that family incivility can have far-reaching consequences beyond the home. A toxic family environment that undermines one's self-worth and damages ties with loved ones can create psychological distress at work, resulting in poorer work performance.

Individuals who face family incivility often worry and feel anxious about why they have such issues and agonise over how to resolve them. When this anxiety is carried over to the workplace, it drains them of their energy, making them less able to concentrate on their work — fuelling a cycle of unhappiness and unproductiveness.

In my study, employees who suffered from family incivility were 35 per cent more likely to report psychological distress symptoms such as depression or anxiety than employees who did not suffer from family incivility. In turn, these distressed employees were 30 per cent more likely to receive below-average performance evaluations in their jobs than those who did not suffer from such symptoms.

As with victims of bullying who become bullies themselves, those who experience incivility at home may go on to deliver it in the workplace — in part because they have come to see such behaviour as "normal". In one example, an employee was reprimanded for repeated sarcastic comments towards his co-workers — something he thought was funny but which had come to bother his colleagues.

Of course, not everyone is similarly affected by family incivility. My research finds that employees who have higher self-esteem experienced less family incivility. Those with lower self-esteem, who feel they have no control over their life, not only experienced more uncivil family behaviour but were also less able to handle its detrimental effects.

People with lower self-esteem became psychologically more distressed and doubtful over their power to change the family situation. To resolve tensions, they may minimise contact with family members and spend even more time at work — a response that can itself backfire because spending more time at work and less at home only aggravates work-family conflict.

By understanding how family tension influences work stress and performance, companies can develop and engage in more effective employee welfare programmes. Such activities might involve sponsored family therapist seminars to help employees recognise if they have family issues, and how to address them in order to avoid or minimise impact on their work performance.

Beyond family incivility, such resources can also help those going through divorce or death within the family, which are likely to have similar, if not more severe, consequences.

Companies can also do their part to encourage civility at work and create conditions that enhance employees' self-esteem. For example, encouragement from supervisors such as positive feedback on tasks, role models, and pep talks can help boost employees' self-esteem, as can job transitions or rotations to other departments or overseas offices.

It is important to recognise that maintaining a healthy work-family balance is not limited to merely providing time off for childcare responsibilities, which the Government has done through parental and childcare leave schemes. All employees —married, single, with or without children — can be affected by various types of stressors at home, ranging from being treated uncivilly, to divorce and illness or deaths of family members. We can do more to help them.

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