

# It's Time to Bring Back Courtesy to the Workplace

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Respect towards others should be standard behavior in the workplace, regardless of role, rank, or reputation. But as companies have become more virtual, global, and stressed out, this assumption can break down unless we focus on it more explicitly. Let me explain.

In the not-too-distant past, the majority of work was conducted either face-to-face or through real-time conversations in the office, factory, at meetings, or through customer visits. These personal interactions allowed people to get to know each other and create human connections. They also fostered a basic degree of courtesy since it's awkward to have continuing contact with someone who is rude, obnoxious, or unpleasant to be around.

But for many people today, the majority of communication is neither face-to-face nor real time. In addition to the prevalence of email and voicemail, teleconferences and videoconferences have replaced other opportunities for in-person get-togethers. In addition, managers are traveling more than ever to keep in touch with global contacts, which has further reduced regular collegial contact (and made many offices look like ghost towns). The net result of this shift is that much more of our work today is conducted impersonally, which may mean that there may be less pressure to observe social niceties.

A couple of [recent studies support this possibility](#). One, from the University of [Michigan](#), found that today's college students are less empathetic than those of past generations. The researchers speculate that this is because they have grown up with more reliance on digital communication. Separately, a study at Duke found that Americans had one-third fewer friends and confidants than they had two decades earlier, possibly because digital interactions were replacing personal connections.

In the absence of high-touch, personal connections many managers are reporting breakdowns in courtesy and respect, many of which are amplified by the stresses of the workplace. Some common examples I've heard recently include a last-minute request for "urgent" information without regard for what it will take to get it done; a manager ignoring emails and voice mails which delayed resolution of a customer problem; a team that worked all night to meet a budget deadline and then received neither feedback nor thanks for their work; and a manager in Asia who was required to attend regular teleconferences with a North American team that kept her up through the middle of the night, with no acknowledgement of what was involved.

And these examples may be only the tip of the iceberg. What's worse is that the continuation of these behaviors will eventually create a toxic environment that will reduce

employee engagement and management motivation, which is something we're already seeing in some companies.

To prevent a further breakdown in courtesy and respect, let me make two simple (but not easy) suggestions:

First, convene a meeting with your team, including virtual members, and talk openly about the kind of workplace behaviors you expect from each other. What does it mean to act courteously and respectfully? Have there been incidences where that didn't happen? Assuming that people aren't intentionally trying to be difficult, what provokes these kinds of unproductive behaviors, and what are their consequences? Having an open dialogue on this subject can powerfully re-orient your team, making them more aware of workplace courtesy and when it's lacking.

Second, encourage your team and your colleagues to (courteously) push back on bad behaviors when they occur. The reality is that most people don't plan to be mean or insensitive; it just happens in the heat of the moment without them realizing the impact on others. So if you can find the right ways of calling out these behaviors, it may be possible to reduce their impact and prevent them in the future.

Most of us want to work with colleagues who treat us with respect and courtesy. These days, however, we might have to put in some extra effort to make that happen.