

COMMENTARY

Looking on the bright side: Rewarding civil behavior in academia

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Happiness is to know that every day my life touches others in a positive way, whether to make them laugh or learn or both at once. —Carla Buss

What is legal is not always what is ethical. Through their discussion of the legal ambiguities surrounding academic freedom, Cortina, Cortina, and Cortina (2019) demonstrate why the law, and the “ever-changing legal landscape” (p. 361), is an insufficient remedy for the “wicked problem” (Camillus, 2008) that uncivil discourse and behaviors can introduce into academic workplaces—namely counterproductivity that results in “failing to advance the teaching, research, or service mission of the public university” (Cortina et al., 2019, p. 372). One aspect of their article that drew our attention was their argument suggesting the merit in promoting and rewarding civil and kind behavior in organizations (academic or otherwise). This commentary expands on their suggestion by first discussing incivility through a positive ethics framework and then by outlining the inherent value in rewarding civil behavior in the workplace through a practical discussion related to defining, promoting, and rewarding civility. We conclude by describing a specific example: a scholarship award for doctoral students that was created to reward those who demonstrate positive community building.

A positive ethics perspective

According to Hillard and Dent (2017), positive business ethics is “an inspired commitment to build long-term personal, organizational, and societal success through the consistent pursuit of ethical business behavior” (p. 39). Within the context of this article, ethics refers to the rules of conduct that people create to define right and wrong behaviors associated with the treatment of others (Sekerka, Comer, & Godwin, 2014). The positive ethics approach reframes ethical dilemmas, like the wicked problem described earlier, into ethical opportunities (Hillard & Dent, 2017). Rather than focusing on the consequences of negative or undesired behavior such as incivility, the positive ethics approach uses positive examples of productive, prosocial behavior to show positive role models. Proponents of positive ethics consider compliance with legal regulations as a moral minimum and encourage organizations to strive for a higher standard by endorsing an organizational climate that fosters empowerment, development, and the open discussion of ethical matters (Sekerka et al., 2014). The examples of workplace incivility outlined by Cortina et al. (2019)—condescension, interruption, omission of common courtesies, and unprofessional terms of address—are certainly not conducive to the type of organizational climate that is promoted by the positive ethics perspective.

So how does taking a positive ethics perspective inform the prevention of workplace incivility? LaVan and Martin (2008) propose an ethics intervention for workplace bullying based on a process-oriented ethical approach that considers workplace bullying to be an ethical dilemma. Although workplace bullying is a more overt form of workplace mistreatment than incivility, the model proposed by LaVan and Martin (2008) can also be readily applied to a workplace incivility intervention and is consistent with a positive ethics approach. According to LaVan and Martin (2008), an organizational intervention should include the following:

- The identification of desired behavioral norms, which should be aligned with the larger organizational culture and outlined in codes of conduct
- Training and development opportunities, as well as role-modeling behaviors by administrators
- Continuous monitoring and improvement of the policies and practices that are put into place to curb undesired behaviors
- Awards and recognition for exemplary behaviors
- The empowering of individuals to act in ways that discourage behaviors related to workplace mistreatment

In the next section, we provide suggestions for implementing these action items in the context of a positive ethics approach to the prevention of workplace incivility.

Tending to prosocial behavior at work: Rewarding civil behavior

A search of the extant social psychology literature shows that although the negative effects of workplace incivility have been thoroughly cataloged and investigated, very little of that same literature has been dedicated to the positive approach of consciously rewarding examples of civil behavior. In fact, the bulk of the literature that has explored rewarding civility is housed within the nursing field, which considers rewards for civility as an essential part of interventions designed to create safer and more collegial environments in the medical profession (e.g., Clark & Kenski, 2017; Clark, Olender, Kenski, & Cardoni, 2013). Therefore, in this section, we draw from the nursing literature to provide actionable examples related to defining, promoting, and rewarding civil behaviors.

Define it

LaVan and Martin (2008) suggest that behavioral norms and expectations should be clearly outlined in codes of conduct. However, Cortina et al. (2019, p. 360) point out that “those in power get to dictate what counts as *civil* and then use that to discredit dissident voices.” So, the questions become these: Who gets to decide what the behavioral norms surrounding civility should look like? How do we balance the power so that civility is not used as a mask for silencing minority voice? One solution is to assemble a Civility Committee (Clark et al., 2013), which could have an elected and rotating membership. To be more inclusive, this committee could comprise faculty, staff, and student representatives. The Civility Committee would be charged with drafting a civility charter (with periodic review of that charter) that could then be included in the current code of conduct for both students and employees (Clark & Kenski, 2017). Allowing a committee to cocreate desired norms of behavior will also enable better alignment with the larger organizational culture.

Promote it

Organizations (academic or otherwise) regularly require diversity training sessions to help employees better recognize bias in the workplace. We argue that civility workshops or other

professional well-being initiatives (Clark *et al.*, 2013) could play a similar role in bringing awareness to ambiguous behaviors that can be unintentionally perceived as uncivil in nature. In-house workshops could cover topics such as conflict resolution, communication, and team-building. Cortina *et al.* (2019) also point to larger training programs, such as the ones developed for both supervisors and employees by U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. It is also important to recognize that promoting a more civil workplace requires leadership to consciously serve as role models for civil discourse (Clark & Kenski, 2017; LaVan & Martin, 2008). For example, a regularly scheduled newsletter or blog post that is dedicated to engaging in civil rhetoric, highlighting relevant current events in the news, and shout outs to university members who demonstrate acts of kindness (e.g., “civility moments”) are ways organizational leadership could help to foster a learning community centered on respect and inclusion.

Reward it

Clark *et al.* (2013) suggest linking an evaluation for collegiality to performance criteria, saying that effectively being able to work well together is just as important as the more traditional evaluations for teaching, research, and service. They do suggest, however, that a 360-degree feedback system be utilized for this evaluation to prevent mischaracterizations or abuse. As educators, we often require this type of assessment of student teams in our courses; maybe it is time to turn the camera lens on ourselves. Civility could also be rewarded through the creation of a voluntary badge or certificate program with specific requirements for completion (like civility training sessions, committee assignments, social events, or even demonstrated acts of kindness; Clark *et al.*, 2013). Finally, as Cortina *et al.* (2019) suggest, cash awards, such as university-wide civility awards or scholarships, could certainly demonstrate that the organization embraces and encourages positive community building. In the next section, we provide an applied example: a scholarship we created at The University of Texas at Arlington for doctoral students to reward students who engage in positive acts to build community and serve as role models by displaying exceptional concern and kindness toward others.

Applied example: The Carla Buss memorial scholarship

It is noteworthy that an estimated 50% of students who register in a doctoral program do not complete the degree (Caruth, 2015). Although the journey through a doctoral program is challenging, the high attrition rate is regarded as a major problem in higher education (Caruth, 2015). One of the primary reasons for attrition from doctoral programs is poor socialization experiences, which include negative experiences in classmate collaboration, academic guidance, and department and university interactions (Kong *et al.*, 2013). Further, research suggests that promoting a culture of civility tends to defuse enmity between classmates and create unity between students, promoting an energized workplace (Caruth, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014). As a way to promote and encourage these types of civil behaviors, and to memorialize a student who created this type of environment, the Carla Buss Memorial Scholarship was created.

Define it

Carla Buss was a PhD student at The University of Texas at Arlington during 2010–2012. She was held in high regard because of her academic excellence and the collaborative and supportive way she worked with others. From the day she began the doctoral program, she looked out for her classmates and was seen as a leader among PhD students. When a new batch of students arrived, Carla was the first to take them under her wing to offer help and mentoring as they adjusted to the doctoral program. She was the epitome of a great friend and colleague and helped create a collaborative, friendly, productive climate in the PhD program. Sadly, cancer took Carla too soon.

The Carla Buss Memorial Scholarship was created in her memory to recognize doctoral students who share the same special combination of academic excellence and positive community building. Twenty-seven different faculty and PhD students at The University of Texas at Arlington donated to fund an endowed scholarship in Carla's honor. Each year PhD students and faculty are asked to nominate a doctoral student they feel exemplifies these qualities (self-nominations are not accepted). The aim of this scholarship is to recognize and reward PhD students who, like Carla, are role models for the kind of positive behavior we want to encourage in our academic organizations—outstanding examples of academic excellence, servant leadership, and willingness to mentor others. Each year the winner of the Carla Buss Memorial Scholarship is also asked to participate in several PhD program activities:

- Speaking at the annual Boot Camp for new doctoral students
- Leading the PhD students in a service project in the community
- Participating in the selection committee to select the following year's winner

The service project aims to serve the community surrounding the university. Past projects have included collecting donations for the campus food bank for food insecure students and volunteering at a local homeless shelter. In addition to serving the community, the service project is an opportunity for PhD students to participate in a teambuilding activity together. The goal is to encourage workplace civility among doctoral students, to “raise” PhD students in a collaborative, prosocial climate, and to provide new PhD students with outstanding examples of more senior doctoral students who are prosocial and good community members.

Promote it

Each fall the winner(s) of the Carla Buss Memorial Scholarship attend the orientation for the incoming doctoral students. During the orientation, the winner(s), along with the PhD director, share the story of how Carla inspired faculty and PhD students to create the scholarship in her honor. Students are asked to watch for other students who are unusually helpful or kind to them as they transition to PhD program life and to consider nominating such students for the scholarship in the spring. This sets the tone for the incoming students that civility and prosocial acts are encouraged, supported, and rewarded. There is a plaque in one of the hallways close to many of the doctoral student and faculty offices that includes the names of all the previous winners of the award.

Reward it

Winner(s) of the award are recognized in several ways. First, during a PhD Program luncheon held in the spring semester of each year, the winner is announced in front of PhD students, faculty, and deans. Second, winners are presented with a plaque and their name is added to the plaque in the hallway. Third, the student(s) are also provided a monetary reward, which is given in the form of a check. Finally, they are recognized at the beginning of the fall semester during the PhD Boot Camp as a role model who is not only academically excellent but also credited with creating a positive culture of workplace civility.

Conclusion

Our commentary takes a positive ethics point of view that advocates for rewarding civility in the workplace. Cortina et al. (2019) capture the heart of the issue by saying, “Public institutions may be legally prohibited from *mandating* respectful conduct on campus, but they can certainly *encourage* it. They can also discourage disrespect and do so in ways that do not silence critical

speech” (p. 372). Supported by the positive ethics literature, we suggest a practical intervention for the promotion of civil behaviors and provide actionable examples for defining, promoting, and rewarding positive community building, collegiality, and civility at work. The Carla Buss Memorial Scholarship is an applied example of our suggested approach. We hope this commentary inspires similar initiatives at other academic institutions. Perhaps more efforts like these that encourage and reward civil behavior in PhD students will make them better academic colleagues, leading to better climates in the academic institutions of the future.

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