

Civility – How to Manage the Public

By Darlene Janulis

Very few, if any, have not been touched by the recession. We all have felt the uncertainty and anxiety of our roller coaster economy. We have witnessed the bankruptcy of some of our nation's most powerful financial institutions. We have seen government bailouts of our banking system, government ownership of the US auto industry, Ponzi schemes extracting billions of dollars from innocent investors, double-digit unemployment, rising home foreclosures, declining property values, budget cuts for our schools and public safety employees, and the list goes on into 2010.

Unfortunately, we as a society seem to be failing the respect and consideration test. Opinion surveys have reported for years that Americans are quite concerned about the incivility they encounter every day. They perceive a steady decline of standards during their lifetimes and see no realistic indication that this trend will be reversed. Last year television audiences watched hostile crowds and public figures' shocking display of rude behavior and lack of civility.

Early indications of this fiscal year indicate we are still living in uncertain times, and many agree the economy is driving people's tempers to a boiling point. Recovery may take longer than anyone would like, and as government officials have to deal with dwindling budgets, they are simultaneously facing diminished civility and hostility both in the work place and at public meetings.

It's very important to stay focused when dealing with the public and staff. Psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli has a helpful summary for dealing with rude behavior. His advice may help you stay focused in your discussions with staff and community members.

1. Don't personalize rude behavior – it's unlikely to be about you, although it's directed to you.
2. Be aware that rude behavior comes from various sources (stress, illness, insecurity, etc.).
3. Respond with calmness rather than behavior that escalates rude behavior.
4. "An eye for an eye," is a poor approach; don't buy another's insecurity and make it your own.
5. Self-righteous behavior only reflects poorly on you; don't use the opportunity to demean another.
6. Try to address the underlying cause of the behavior.
7. When necessary, set limits tactfully and assertively, not aggressively.
8. If the conversation remains irrational, know when to quit.
9. Don't assume rudeness is a permanent part of someone's personality. It is a pattern of rudeness that determines character, not one mishap.
10. In the end, always let empathy – the ability to read others accurately – be your guide in understanding rudeness, knowing how to respond to a rude individual and knowing when to leave the scene.

Simply put, people are rude when they are stressed, unhappy and rushed. With the depressed economy, many are experiencing all three at any given time. Incivility and rudeness is a symptom of a bad state of mind, and people are more likely to feel more frustration due to the economy.

If you find yourself on the receiving end of bad behavior, stand your ground and stay in control. Remain focused on the real issue. Set the ground rules for discussion. Stay cool under pressure and stick to the ground rules you've set. Be a model and example of the civility the situation demands. Be calm in your body language and tone of voice. Don't take incivility personally.

Keep yourself on the high ground – and if you're really masterful at it, you will help others go there as well.