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Incivility on the Front Lines of Business

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Frontline Work When Everyone Is Angry

Today's public-facing employees deal with insults, rants, and rudeness — and leaders must better protect them. Here's how. **by Christine Porath**

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Ryan Snook

Editor's note: This article mentions threats of violence and sexual assault.

In October 2020 Dr. Adrienne Boissy, then the chief patient experience officer at Cleveland Clinic, had a big problem, and it wasn't just Covid-19. Caregivers at the hospital, already stretched thin by the pandemic, were coming to her with alarming reports of abusive behavior from patients and visitors: mean comments, screaming tirades, even racist insults. "It's never been so bad!" she told me.

I've studied incivility — defined as rudeness, disrespect, or insensitive behavior — in workplaces for more than 20 years, polling hundreds of thousands of people worldwide about their experiences. But after that conversation with Dr. Boissy, who is now the chief medical officer at Qualtrics and a neurologist at Cleveland Clinic, I wondered whether incivility is getting worse over time, particularly for frontline workers, who labor in person and often interact directly with customers and patients. These workers' industries include health care, protective services (think police officers), retail, food production and processing, maintenance, agriculture, transportation (including airlines), hospitality, and education.

My research has found that reports of incivility are indeed on the rise — as evidenced not just by viral videos of airline passengers refusing to wear masks or café patrons hurling racial epithets but also by my recent survey that asked more than 2,000 people around the world how they have experienced rudeness lately. Even amid a global health crisis in which frontline workers were heralded as essential and heroic, these employees still became punching bags on whom weary, stressed-out, often irrational customers (and sometimes fellow employees) took out their anxieties and frustrations.

This kind of incivility leads to negative outcomes not only for the workers who experience it directly but also those who witness it — all of which harms businesses and society. In this article, we'll explore those consequences and discuss how leaders can help to improve things.

Note that incivility takes many forms, from ignoring people to intentionally undermining them to mocking, teasing, and belittling them. For this article, it does not refer to physical aggression or violence, although incivility can spiral into aggressive behaviors.

Where We Are

Identifying and studying incivility can be difficult, because bad behavior is often in the eye of the recipient. Behavior you consider uncivil may not be regarded the same way by a customer — but if you feel disrespected, whether your counterpart intended it or not, your work will suffer. In addition, what's considered uncivil varies by culture, generation, gender, industry, and organization.

Regardless of how individuals define incivility, they're reporting more of it — and have been for a while now. In 2005 nearly half of the workers I surveyed across the globe said they were treated rudely at work at least once a month. In 2011 it was up to 55%, and by 2016 it had climbed to 62%.

In August of this year, I designed a new survey to further track incivility trends and glean more insight into what's happening on the front lines of business and society today. It drew on customer-focused studies I previously conducted with marketing professors Deborah MacInnis and Valerie Folkes at USC Marshall School of Business, as well as on insights from people in a range of consumer-facing industries.

In the new survey, the data I collected came from more than 2,000 people in more than 25 industries in various roles across the globe (representing every major region except Antarctica). They included both frontline employees and people who had observed them at work. Here's what I found:

- 76% of respondents experience incivility at least once a month.
- 78% witness incivility at work at least once a month, and 70% witness it at least two to three times a month.
- 73% report that it's not unusual for customers to behave badly.
- 78% believe that bad behavior from customers toward employees is more common than it was five years ago.
- 66% believe bad behavior from customers toward other customers is more common than it was five years ago.

These numbers have risen steadily and sharply since my 2012 survey about customer incivility. In that survey, 61% of respondents reported that it was not unusual for customers to behave badly, 49% believed that bad behavior from customers toward employees was more common than it was five years before, and 35% believed bad behavior from customers toward other customers was also more common.

In addition to this year's survey, I conducted many interviews with employees, managers, and organizational leaders to learn more about how they're experiencing incivility from customers and patients.

A pediatric emergency medicine physician shared:

> *Daily, families disparage, yell at, and belittle us while we provide care for their children. A few months ago, I asked a father to put his mask back on, per hospital policy. He stormed out of the room and said he was leaving because he did not believe in masks. I came back in and his six-year-old child told me, "Daddy spit on the ground." Sure enough, there was a big spit wad on the hospital floor.*

One retail employee related a customer's response to her saying "Good morning":

> *I do not need you for anything. Leave me alone. If I need you, I will call you. You are here to serve, not to talk with me.*

A restaurant patron described her sister's bad behavior:

> *She berated a waitress to the point of making her cry. Why? Because the waitress didn't bring her salad just the way she ordered it.*

A traveler shared their experience of watching a fellow passenger yell at a car service driver:

> *He yelled, "What are you waiting for?! Get your act together!" He shoved his luggage at the driver and stormed out. The driver stood blinking for a minute before following.*

A former school principal explained what educators and staff must often shield themselves from:

> *Parents approach school staff with claws out, ready for blood. They're unwilling to listen and are rude, mean, and threatening.*

Then there are the reports of online behavior, exemplified by the emails received by the customer support team of a video game company:

> *In one interaction, a customer was upset about some experience they had in the game, and they sent long paragraphs of complaints that included comments such as telling the support representatives that they hope their wives and daughters will be raped.*

Needless to say, it's gotten pretty ugly out there. Some uncivil behavior may be too extreme to fix, and some people are unmotivated or unwilling to change; in my research, 4% of people report being rude

because it's fun and they can get away with it. But research shows that much of incivility can be reined in. To do that, we need to understand its drivers.

How We Got Here

So, why does it feel like incivility is getting worse? My research suggests that several compounding factors and pressures have brought us to this point:

Stress. Over the years, I've found that stress is the number one driver of incivility. In my most recent data, 73% of respondents who had been rude to a coworker blamed it on stress, and 61% pointed to being overloaded with work.

The pandemic, the economy, war, divisive politics, the changing nature of work, and continued uncertainty are all taking a toll. Any (or all) of these factors may contribute to our stress and burnout, which have risen to unprecedented levels recently. And considering our reduced levels of self-care, exercise, and sleep, it's no surprise that we have a tougher time regulating our emotions.

Negative emotions. In October 2020 my brother Mike Porath and I reported data from The Mighty, a supportive community Mike founded for people facing health challenges and those who care for them. A survey of over 70,000 readers and community members found that the number of respondents who chose anger as one of their top emotions more than doubled from March to September — rising from 20% to 45%.

Naturally, as negative emotions swell in us, we may lash out or take them out on others, often without realizing it. Even if we muster restraint, when we're not feeling well we're less mindful and less capable of interacting positively and respectfully.

Weakened ties. We can also attribute the epidemic of rudeness to a general fraying of community and workplace relationships. I define "community" as a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare. In a 2014 study of 20,000 people for my book *Mastering Community*, I found that 65% didn't feel any sense of community. In July of this year a colleague and I surveyed more than 1,500 Conference for Women participants, finding that their sense of community has decreased 37% since the beginning of the pandemic.

The feeling of lacking community is exacerbated when people don't feel valued, appreciated, or heard — which applies to the vast majority of employees. Sometimes subtle (or not-so-subtle) behaviors are what sting most. A European participant in my recent survey explained:

> *Nothing happened — and that was the rudest part itself: A junior colleague got completely blanked by a more senior figure. He said good morning and the senior staff member just continued walking.... Not surprisingly, the junior person left after about six months.*

Technology. For all its benefits, technology can lead to greater disconnection and rudeness. It can also distract us from the humans in front of us, as countless frontline employees and cashiers have reported. Often we're too busy scrolling through Instagram or listening to music on our headphones to interact with those serving us or ringing up our groceries — much less to utter a simple "Hello," "Please," or "Thank you."

This heavy use of technology, and of social media in particular, may come with a price: We're taking in a whole lot of negativity (consciously or unconsciously) on a daily basis. The content we consume affects not only us but others too. What we ingest from online sources can harm our

mood and mental health, and we can pass our anxiety, depression, and stress on to others.

Finally, in the digital age messages are often subject to communication gaps and misunderstanding — and, unfortunately, putdowns are more easily delivered when it doesn't happen face-to-face. While electronic communication can bring us together in remarkable ways, it also liberates us to voice our frustrations, hurl insults, and take people down a notch from a safe distance.

Lack of self-awareness. One of the biggest takeaways from my decades of research is that incivility usually arises from ignorance — not malice. People lack self-awareness. According to research by Tasha Eurich, an organizational psychologist and a collaborator of mine, a whopping 95% of people think they're self-aware but only 10%–15% actually are. That means 80%–85% of people misunderstand how they're perceived and how they affect others. We may have good intentions and work hard to be patient and tolerant, but our tones, nonverbal signals, or actions may come across differently to the people we interact with and those who witness the interactions.

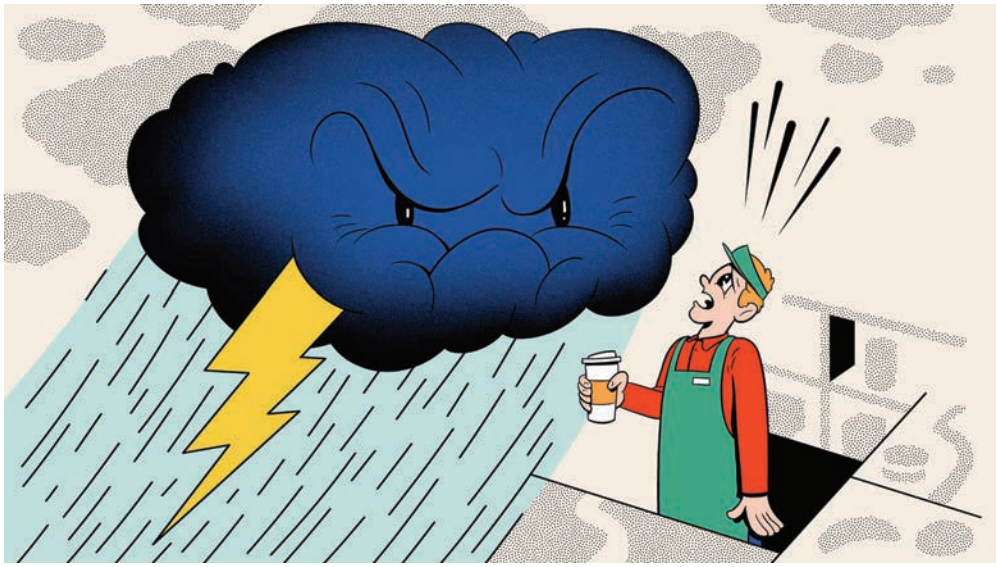
The Costs of Incivility

Research shows that rudeness is like the common cold: It's contagious, it spreads quickly, anyone can be a carrier — at work, at home, online, or in our communities — and getting infected doesn't take much.

When incivility does spread, it affects people and organizations in several ways.

Incivility's mental and physical toll. My research has shown over and over that incivility's effects are both mental and physical. This tracks with sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's 1902 notion of the "looking-

glass self," which explains that we use others' expressions (e.g., smiles or snarls), behaviors (e.g., ignoring or paying attention to us), and reactions (e.g., listening or belittling) to define ourselves. How we believe others see us shapes who we are and how we behave. Brief interactions signal respect or disrespect. People feel valued when we acknowledge and thank them. When we cut people down, we make them feel smaller and uglier.



Ryan Snook

These dynamics help to explain why the effects of incivility are so damaging. Merely being exposed to rude words reduces our ability to process and recall information. Dysfunctional and aggressive thoughts (and sometimes actions) can skyrocket. Witnessing rudeness and triggers of incivility — such as reading a nasty comment on social media or listening to an argumentative interview — takes a cognitive toll, interfering with our working memory and decreasing our performance. And these disruptions can be catastrophic. For example, exposure to rudeness has been shown to negatively impact medical teams' diagnoses and procedural performance.

Incivility's toll on business. In my recent research, I found that when people witness rude treatment of employees or frontline workers, 85% report being annoyed, 80% are upset, and 75% are angry. Additionally, 61% report being distressed and 43% feel threatened.

When customers witness other customers being uncivil to employees, they have a few responses. Their attitudes toward the employees improve, but their feelings toward the workers' organization shift in costly ways: 42% report that the rude behavior changes their perception of the company, 40% question whether they want to do business there again, 65% think the organization should better protect its employees, 45% question its values — and, overall, people's willingness to use the company's products and services drops 35%. MacInnis, Folkes, and I found that these feelings are tied to concerns for human dignity and whether others are being treated respectfully.

How Organizations Can Address Incivility

Business leaders have a responsibility not only to support their employees in dealing with incivility, both in the moment and afterward, but also to try to mitigate it in the first place. I've used the following four-part Cycle to Civility© framework, outlined in my book *Mastering Civility*, in dozens of organizations. It covers the entire employee experience: recruiting, coaching, scoring, and practicing. While executives and HR leaders may take the lead on implementing the framework, anyone can benefit from being familiar with it. And although focusing on any of these steps individually will help move your organization's culture toward civility, change will happen faster if you work on more than one at a time.

Recruiting. Fostering a feeling of community begins with who you hire — so choose wisely. During the hiring process, use techniques that will help reveal whether a candidate is well equipped to handle incivility

on the front lines. Rely on structured behavioral interviews and ask questions like, "Tell me about a time when you've had to deal with stress or conflict at work. What did you do?" Use follow-up questions to probe deeper, and pay attention to the person's tone, demeanor, and pace of speaking, which may provide useful indicators of their attitude. In addition, look for candidates who can be trained to respond well to incivility, including those who are self-aware and motivated to improve and who embrace learning. Talk about your organization's values, and ask questions to understand how the person's past behavior aligns with them.

Recruiting applies to clients and customers too, since managers can spend an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and focus dealing with the fallout of uncivil actions. If you're in a position to choose the clients you serve, it's worth asking, "Are they really worth it?" Why not investigate their reputations and how their people are likely to treat yours? One founder I know charged some clients a "high-maintenance tax" that took into account how challenging they were to deal with, sometimes amounting to 1.5x the normal price of the company's services.

Coaching. Training your employees to handle bad behavior from customers is a critical component of creating a more civil workplace. Just as important is determining how you expect those customers and patients to treat your employees and steering them toward that desired behavior. Taking a few steps can help.

First, set expectations and establish norms for how people interact with one another, and for what they should do when others don't adhere to the norms.

UMass Memorial Health, a health care network in Massachusetts, has introduced a patient and visitor code of conduct. At kiosks on campuses and in offices, visitors are asked to sign an agreement to adhere to the code of conduct, which formalizes the parameters and expectations of their behavior. UMass Memorial has also established a verbal template that employees can use to respond to someone's incivility, which includes: *Either you stop [the problematic behavior], or [the result of the behavior].* For example, "Either you stop yelling at me, or it's going to make it harder for me to give your mother her meds."

The goal, says Laura Flynn, senior director of performance, learning, and education, is to create a respectful, safe environment. When UMass Memorial Health piloted the new program, it collected and analyzed feedback and experimented with options to improve outcomes. In just over a month, it had more than 56,000 signed agreements for the code of conduct — and only four visitors were asked to leave during that time.

Second, encourage and train employees to show empathy. Being empathetic in interactions with others can require skills in negotiation, stress management, difficult conversations, and mindfulness. Organizations need to coach employees in these skills, as well as in listening fully, giving and receiving feedback (both positive and corrective), working across differences, and dealing with difficult people. People who possess these skills are better equipped to deal with incivility.

When Dr. Adrienne Boissy was the chief patient experience officer at Cleveland Clinic, she rolled out an eight-hour course where physicians role-played scenarios about how to have better conversations with patients to express their intention of care. In a study of 1,500 physicians who participated, there was a statistically significant and positive

impact on their capacity for empathy, which had a positive effect on patient experience. The training also reduced burnout and emotional exhaustion among physicians, an effect that persisted for three months after the completion of the course — suggesting that the payoff for coaching employees who interact with patients or customers is significant.

Also helpful for empathy is considering why someone is being uncivil. Many people are struggling with ongoing stress and challenging circumstances, for example. Adriene McCoy, senior vice president and chief people officer of Baptist Health, a health care organization in Florida, told me that its leaders are coaching employees to take a beat before responding to uncivil colleagues, patients, and families. "People are so stressed that we often just react instead of thinking about why," McCoy said.

My research shows the value of this approach. When you encounter rude behavior at work, pause and try to put yourself in the uncivil person's position. "Someone's behavior could be due to dementia, intense pain, behavioral challenges, addiction....People come to the hospital when they're really challenged — not on their best day," Flynn notes. So when someone is uncivil, ask yourself: *Do I have the whole argument?* And, importantly: *What's the most generous interpretation of their behavior?* This question is especially valuable when you're stressed or feeling burned out. Before shutting down, saying no, or displaying frustration, try to appreciate where the other person is. You might even go one step further and ask, *How can I help them?*

Finally, nudge customers and patients toward empathy. Nudges — short, personalized recommendations with a clear call to action — have proven useful in a variety of settings, including retail and health care.

McCoy recalls going into a Starbucks during the pandemic and feeling annoyed when her drink wasn't made as she'd asked it to be. Then she saw a sign on the wall that read "People who are here chose to be here." "This stuck with me," she says. The employees were just human beings doing their best during a difficult time. "So they didn't put drizzle on my drink. I moved on."

In addition to its code-of-conduct agreements, UMass Memorial Health has begun displaying signage to nudge patients and visitors toward respectful behavior. Upon arrival, they see a welcome sign that says "Help us keep this a safe space of healing, kindness, and respect." In a small font at the bottom are the hospital's standards of respect. A second sign, placed in units and the emergency department, has the patient and visitor code of conduct, which spells out unacceptable behavior such as yelling, swearing, spitting, and making offensive remarks about race, ethnicity, or religion. Laura Flynn told me that trying to protect employees with signs and nudges is a delicate balance "because you have to be sensitive to each patient and visitor's circumstance, and it can't feel like a hammer [to them]."

Scoring. One of the most compelling ways to show how much civility matters to your organization is to recognize and reward it. Gestures of appreciation, for example, can help reduce burnout, promote retention, and aid mental health and well-being. When reviewing performance, don't just focus on the results; also consider the *how* of the work by expressing gratitude for the full contributions people make, which includes handling uncivil behavior. Recognition may not make up for the abuse they're weathering, but it helps people feel like their community is backing them and appreciates the care they're delivering — or simply the fact that they're showing up.

Peers are an underutilized source of appreciation. Consider using a peer-to-peer recognition program, like the Fool's Gold program at stock adviser The Motley Fool. Each employee is given an allotment of "gold" that they can dole out to their coworkers to recognize them for any action they feel is worthy. Employees can redeem the gold for gift cards and other rewards. There's also a recognition live feed that allows employees to read all posted compliments. It's a way to share information and celebrate accomplishments related to both results and the *how* of work.

Practice. Make sure your employees have the tools they need to protect themselves from uncivil behavior — both in the moment and over time.

Start by implementing and enacting de-escalation training and protocols. On the front lines, having the skills to bring down the temperature of a tense conversation, as well as a clear protocol for handling a difficult patient or customer, is invaluable. For example, at UMass Memorial, employees receive training in various forms of de-escalation depending on their role, and teams have the discretion to define what they act on. If employees face bad behavior, they attempt to de-escalate it on their own. If their efforts aren't successful, they get their manager involved. If that doesn't work, they call the patient advocacy staff for guidance about how to move forward. Patient advocacy teams often consult with quality and safety staff and even the chief medical officer if necessary.

Then encourage and model recovery. Because experiencing and witnessing incivility has detrimental effects on mental and physical health, it's critical that people take care of themselves — and that organizations give them the tools they need to do it. Adriene McCoy told me that a colleague once said to her, "I'm getting crispy" — that is, short-tempered. McCoy encouraged the colleague to take care

of themself, and now she's careful to regularly gauge her own level of burnout. She also empowers employees to recognize when they're approaching "fully baked" and need to take action to prevent it.

If you're a leader, your self-care sends employees a powerful signal. Be visible about taking breaks, such as by blocking off time for them on your daily calendar or going on vacation. My research with Tony Schwartz, CEO of The Energy Project, shows that when leaders explicitly encourage employees to work in more sustainable ways and model that behavior themselves, their employees are 55% more engaged, 53% more focused, and much more likely to stay at the company.

Studies I've done of MBAs, executive MBAs, and employees, meanwhile, have consistently shown that thriving outside of work helps you thrive at work by increasing your emotional reserves and instilling a sense of growth and learning. In my research on people who experienced incivility, those who reported thriving in nonwork activities reported 80% better health, 89% greater thriving at work, and 38% more satisfaction with how they handled the incivility.

Encourage your employees and colleagues to have lives outside of work, to fill their buckets with people and activities that bring them joy and meaning. Publicize your nonwork passions, too. When possible, provide employees with choice about where and when they do their work, and always make sure they can take time off.

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Incivility is contagious. Fortunately, civility's power to spread is just as great. We can't control what customers do, but we can equip our employees to handle bad behavior by establishing and enforcing norms of respect, coaching them to have difficult conversations, and showing them the value of rest and recovery. My research confirms that

kindness, consideration, and respect can have a potent effect, creating a positive dynamic of civility that others — maybe even those rude customers — will respond to and build on.

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The Emotional Toll of Frontline Labor

An expert explains the costs of providing "service with a smile."

by Ania G. Wieckowski

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Alicia Grandey Portrait: Studio Bon

For more than two decades, Alicia Grandey, a professor of psychology at Penn State, has been studying how the mistreatment of frontline service workers affects their health and productivity. The behavior she examines ranges from verbal abuse to racial or sexual harassment. She also looks at ambiguous circumstances, in which it's unclear whether any harm was meant, such as when a customer doesn't hold the door for an employee walking behind them.

With reports of incivility on the front lines of business increasing, we spoke with Grandey to find out what companies should know about how customer interactions affect both employees and businesses. What follows is an edited conversation.

Your research has shown that employees experience incivility more frequently from customers than from colleagues. Why is that?

First of all, we're primarily looking at one-off customer encounters, rather than at the ongoing relationships that, say, a salon stylist has with their clients. With strangers there's less accountability: Customers don't feel like they have to play by the rules, because there aren't any negative repercussions for them. Add to that the global axiom that "the customer is always right," and many customers have the sense that they're entitled to act however they want to. Together, these factors set up the same power differential that an employee experiences with their boss, but without the ongoing relationship that can discourage bad behavior.

It's important to point out that incivility typically doesn't happen very often to most employees — on average, once every few months. But incivility from customers is twice as likely to occur as incivility from coworkers or supervisors. And the emotional effects on the employee can last beyond that day.

Customer incivility to frontline workers got a lot of attention during the pandemic lockdowns. Why is it such a problem for companies now?

While a lot was made of an increase in the mistreatment of frontline workers during the pandemic, I haven't seen any evidence supporting the idea that customers have actually become more uncivil toward employees. It's possible that there was an increase in *perceptions* of mistreatment; we know that incivility is in the eye of the beholder and that it can be driven by emotions. So, if employees were exhausted due to understaffing and scared about contagion — as they might well

have been — they could have perceived some discourtesy in ambiguous interactions.

But if there's a silver lining of the pandemic, I think it's that we're now paying more attention to customer mistreatment of workers, because we're finally more aware that the mental and physical well-being of employees is critical to functioning workplaces. With the Great Resignation, we've seen that employees are saying it's not worth it anymore — rather than dealing with customers' bad behavior, they can go get a higher-paid remote or desk job. Companies need to fill these frontline slots, so for once service employees have some power.

What is it about an uncivil interaction that causes harm?

The direct cost is that being the target of incivility or even just observing it can make us go into fight-or-flight mode, which takes our cognitive processing power away from the thing we are trying to focus on. That can be particularly true if the mistreatment is ambiguous — if the employee has to wonder "Was that rudeness? Did they mean it that way?" They ruminate and get distracted.

But there's also an indirect cost that comes from frontline service workers' typically being required — either by their company or by societal norms — to provide "service with a smile," even when a customer is rude to them. The consequences can be high if they don't: They won't get tipped or might lose their job. So the indirect cost factors in when the employee has to expend energy to suppress their natural response. I'm holding my hand over my stomach as we talk about this, because often we physically feel the tension of "faking it" in our gut. That's what we call emotional labor, and that labor is real, just like lifting boxes is real physical labor.

Do service workers in different kinds of jobs experience customer incivility differently?

Those with lower status — frontline workers in retail or fast food, for example — have more-frequent interactions with customers, so they're likely to experience mistreatment more frequently. That said, they're likely to experience it at proportionally the same rate as higher-status workers, like hotel managers or professional service providers. And although higher-status employees may have less-frequent interactions with customers, often they may work with higher-status people who feel more entitled and have more perceived power, which, as we've seen, can lead to more rude behavior.

We also know that people in jobs with ongoing relationships — such as salon stylists — expend less emotional labor, because they and their clients have more-authentic relationships. In contrast, with brief service encounters — such as those in food service — more emotional labor is needed because first impressions are so important to customers' perception of the store or the company.

What about tipped work specifically? You've done research about the connection between these positions — like waitstaff in a restaurant — and abusive behavior like sexual harassment.

We've known for a while that restaurant workers' dependence on tips creates a power difference that leads customers to mistreat them. We wanted to better understand the mechanisms behind that, so we asked restaurant employees what percentage of their pay comes from tips and how much they were required to smile and to hide any negative emotions. Then we looked to see if these factors were related to how often they experienced unwanted sexual behavior, like being touched on the arm or asked for their phone number. What we found is that depending on tips for income and being required to smile at customers increased someone's incidence of sexual harassment by 30%.

What role does race play? Are Black Americans more likely to experience customer incivility, for example?

In a 2007 study, we actually found that white employees reported feeling more stress due to incivility than Black employees did — almost twice as much. But this kind of measure is subjective, and people who don't tend to get mistreated might be more sensitive to small slights. However, when we looked at service workers in grocery stores and a retail store, we found that white employees who didn't smile at customers tended to be given the benefit of the doubt and were viewed positively, while Black employees who didn't smile were assumed to be less warm or actually hostile.

For most of these studies, you focused on the U.S. What expectations do other countries have around how service employees should be treated?

I don't know of any research looking at global incivility broadly, but my guess would be that it really does differ culturally. In the U.S., looking away from someone and not smiling at them are seen as rude, while in Russia not smiling is normal and in Senegal looking away from someone of higher status is considered courteous. So, there are definitely social differences that could affect what is viewed as uncivil, such as the culture's norms around emotional expression and social harmony.

What customers expect of service workers is more universal, however. My colleagues and I did a study that looked at the expectations people have for interpersonal interactions in four countries: Singapore, Israel, France, and the U.S. We found that those expectations were different in each country when it came to relationships between coworkers and between friends, but with customers the expectation was always that employees would hide their true feelings and stay positive. There was some exception to this in France (which perhaps explains the stereotype of French retail employees' being rude to Americans!), which has a more expressive culture and also views service work as a career — employees are typically paid a living wage without being dependent on tips.

All told, what are the costs of incivility toward employees?

When people are insulted, naturally they feel outraged or annoyed — and service workers have to control these emotions to do their jobs well. Our research has shown that this "surface acting" depletes us emotionally, cognitively, and physically, and many studies have found that this form of emotional labor is linked to job burnout and turnover.

To research the impact on cognition and performance, we did a call center simulation in which we asked participants to perform tasks that required attention to detail, such as computing a 7% tax. In the course of their work, half of the participants were mistreated by a phone caller. Those participants made more errors than the ones who were left to do the work in peace. That negative effect was amplified if they were also expected to smile during their conversation with the rude caller.

I was more surprised by our findings about the spillover that emotional labor at work can have into home life. In one study we found that the more exhausted hotel managers were feeling from faking positive emotions at work — if they had to deal with uncivil clients, for example — the more their spouses said the job interfered with their home life and wanted them to quit. In fact, the costs of emotional labor on marital partners were higher than the effects of other job stressors or negative personality types. In another study, we found that the more customer-facing employees faked positive emotions during their workday, the more likely they were to drink heavily after work.

The negative effects of this emotional labor can create a perpetuating cycle. Something happens (maybe a customer is rude to you) and you have to fake a smile. Customers can tell when you're just phoning it in; suddenly your interactions with them don't go so well. That makes you more likely to make a mistake. In some new research I'm collaborating on, we find this spiraling effect builds up over time: Once employees

start faking positive emotions with customers, it becomes harder and harder for them to get back to a place where they really mean that smile.

What can organizations do to address this toll?

Companies should consider offering all employees the kind of emotional training that is typically made available only to those in higher-status service roles, such as doctors. It focuses on two concepts: compassionate detachment, which is the ability to empathize with the customer or patient without taking in their negative emotions, and "deep acting," in which the employee performs some action to bring their feelings in line with the expected work behavior, so they don't feel like they're just pasting on a smile. Deep acting might involve, for example, mentally reframing a rude customer as someone struggling with a difficult life event, which could help the employee's smile be more authentic. Both of these techniques are shown to reduce the negative stress that comes from faking it, and they can even improve performance.

But it's not a great idea to put the burden of training on the people who are the target of mistreatment. Instead, it's better to give employees autonomy — to give them a choice about how to respond to mistreatment from customers, whether that means faking a smile when doing so feels easy or being curt to someone whose behavior has crossed a line. Our research shows that the negative effects of faking a smile are reduced when someone chooses to do it, as compared with when they're forced to.

Ultimately, organizations need to show that they value their employees by paying them what they're worth. In a series of field and experimental studies, we found that emotional labor did not feel so bad when people were financially compensated for that labor.

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How to Respond to a Rude Comment at Work

Consider your own emotions first — then try to see the other person's point of view. **by Amy Gallo**

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You're trying to help a customer get *a refund on a product they weren't able to use. When it takes longer than they'd hoped, they lose patience and ask if they can "talk to someone who's competent enough to deal with the issue."*

One of your students' parents responds to your email explaining that their child needs extra support that you can't provide with, "ISN'T THIS ***YOUR*** *JOB??? Or is actually HELPING students above your pay grade?"*

In a meeting, you offer a solution that you think can help your department make up for this quarter's budget shortfall. Your usually friendly counterpart on another team responds shortly, "I'm not sure why you think that idea would work."

Whether comments like these are made over Slack or email or directly to your face, they sting. No one deserves to be on the receiving end of rude, belittling, or mean behavior at work. Even actions that aren't intended to be hurtful — or are ambiguous — can cause stress and harm. Yet according to research done by Georgetown professor Christine Porath, 98% of people report experiencing incivility at work at some point in their careers.

When it happens, most of us are left wondering: What should I do?

On the one hand, responding (especially in the heat of the moment) can escalate the situation. On the other hand, allowing hurtful comments to go unnoted can condone the behavior and seemingly give the person, or others who witness the incident, permission to mistreat you in the future. Staying silent might even send the message that it's OK for others to behave similarly, leading to a toxic work environment.

Though the decision to say something or let it go is yours, it's helpful to have some guidance on making the call that's right for you. Below is my advice based on the research and interviews with academics, social scientists, and other experts I did for my latest book, *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People)*.

Start with Yourself

First things first. It's normal to have an emotional reaction when you're on the receiving end of a rude comment. You might feel hurt, disappointed, offended, upset, angry, frustrated, exhausted, or a mix of

these and other feelings. It's important to both examine these emotions and get a more objective sense of what happened.

Accept your emotional response. One common response to emotional pain — especially at work — is to try to tamp it down by chiding yourself, "This is just in my head." But it's not: The "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" adage simply isn't true. I've certainly had my breath taken away by some mean-spirited comments that felt like the person had just punched me in the stomach. In fact, neuroscience shows that in certain instances, the brain interprets the impact of being devalued, ignored, shamed, yelled at, rejected, or bullied in ways that are similar to the experience of physical pain.

So give yourself time to investigate your emotional response before deciding what to do. If you're dealing with a customer and you don't have an hour or day to step away and deeply reflect, try taking a few breaths while identifying what you're feeling before you react. Also be kind to yourself and validate your feelings: Research has established that self-compassion brings myriad benefits, including a stronger desire to grow and improve, higher emotional intelligence, and deeper resilience. It also makes you more compassionate toward others.

Remember that "rude" is relative (in most cases). While we can likely all agree that the first two examples above are mean-spirited, the third is more nebulous, like many of the comments or behaviors that we're subjected to at work. We may not know what the person intended. And how we interpret a curt message or a short "it's fine" response may be different from how another person would see it.

Interpretations of incivility can also vary widely across cultures. In the United States, for example, asking to speak to a manager might be

seen as rude, but that behavior could be considered acceptable in the Netherlands or Israel, where open disagreements are seen in a more positive light.

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So as you decide how to respond, consider whether the rudeness may have been unintentional. Is it possible to interpret the person's actions in a way that leaves you feeling less insulted? I'm a big believer in using empathy to see another person's behavior in a more generous light. For example, the parent in the second example above is likely worried about their child and channeling their concern through anger at you. It can be helpful to even express that empathy (more on that below).

It can also be useful to think about your values and which of them might have been violated. Perhaps your client's jab challenged your sense of fairness or equity, or it felt like a microaggression. Or maybe the customer raising their voice doesn't align with your belief in kindness.

Regardless of whether the person meant to be rude, your emotional reaction is valid. Understanding how you feel and why will help you decide whether to respond, and what to say if you do.

Assess the Risks of Responding

Once you better understand your emotional response and consider the other person's perspective, you can weigh the pros and cons of responding. Ask yourself:

What are the risks of speaking up? Addressing rude behavior could challenge the status quo in your organization (especially if your company maintains a "customer is always right" ethos) and may impact your relationships and standing with your coworkers or boss. To gauge how risky speaking up would be, develop a specific picture of the danger you're facing. Think about the questions below and, if time allows, perhaps vet the situation with someone you trust.

If the person is a customer, ask yourself:

- Do I feel comfortable risking the sale?
- What are my company's policies around responding to rude behavior?
- Will my manager or other higher-ups have my back if I decide to say something?

If you don't know this person well or at all:

- Do you have a sense of whether they're likely to bad-mouth you to your manager or influential leaders in the organization?
- How might they hurt your career prospects or reputation if they wanted to?

If you know this person:

- How do they normally respond to being challenged?
- Are they generally self-aware or open to feedback? Will they be dismissive ("You're overreacting; I didn't mean anything by it") or get defensive ("What are you accusing me of?")?
- Do they have the authority to affect decisions around your raises, promotions, or bonuses?
- Can they block your ideas or hold up your projects?

What are the risks of *not* speaking up? We often focus on the risks of actions, our minds going directly to the worst-case scenario, rather than the downsides of *not* doing something. So take time to consider the risks of *not* speaking up as well. Perhaps not addressing the behavior would violate your personal values or the cultural norms you stand for. You might inadvertently condone the comment if you let it pass unremarked or miss an opportunity to help the person understand how their actions impact others. Give these concerns equal weight in your evaluation.

If you are in a position of influence, the risks of silence are greater. Leaders bear the ultimate responsibility (in some cases, a legal one) for making sure no one, especially frontline workers, feels threatened at work.

Making the call to let something go sometimes can be a smart move. But that doesn't mean that you have to swallow your emotions. You might need to vent about the incident to a friend or find ways to emotionally disengage from the situation. For example, can you find ways to bolster your mood after the interaction — spending time with colleagues you enjoy, listening to a favorite song, doing a short meditation, or looking at pictures of your recent vacation?

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There are also several concrete actions you can take instead of confronting the person directly. For example, you might report the incident to someone who can take action or at least keep a record should the behavior happen again. If the offender is a client, for example, your manager may want to know so that they can avoid working with them in the future. Or is there someone else in a senior position who will want to help and has the power to do so?

Know What to Say — and When

If you do decide to confront the offender, *how* you do it matters and can make the difference between resolving the situation or intensifying it. Keep the following strategies in mind.

Consider the timing. Snapping back at someone may feel good in the moment, but it's often helpful to take the time you need to calm down and process what you heard before reacting. A smart rule of thumb is to prioritize your safety and well-being. It may be that confronting the person may encourage further harm — though do keep in mind that experiencing discomfort is not the same as feeling unsafe. It may feel awkward to point out to a customer that raising their voice isn't helping, but that's not the same as fearing they'll physically hurt you.

Use "I" or "it" statements. Oftentimes, people don't realize they've misstepped, so when you confront them, make it clear that you found their comment to be rude by either explaining why or sharing the effect it had on you.

Use statements that start with "I," which explain how you feel and invite the other person to consider your perspective, or "it," which can establish a boundary that's not OK to cross. Some sample "I" statements include: "I felt dismissed by your comment; while that may not have been your intention, that's how it landed with me," and "I see how you feel, and I'm hurt by what you just said." Here are some example responses to establish a boundary: "It's disrespectful to tell people their ideas don't have merit," and "That comment isn't helpful to either of us."

Avoid "you" statements, such as "You're rude." When people feel ashamed, attacked, or mislabeled, they're less likely to hear you or change their behavior.

Ask questions. Especially if the comment was ambiguous, it can be effective to respond with a question, like "What did you mean by that?" You might even ask the person to simply repeat what they said, which may prompt them to think through what they meant and how their words might sound to others.

Try to ask these questions with genuine curiosity, and start with "what" instead of "why," which sounds less challenging. "What led you to say that?" is easier to hear than "Why did you say that?" which can sound like an accusation. Here are some other questions you might use:

- "What was your intention when you said…?"
- "What specifically did you mean by that? I'm not sure I understood."
- "Could you say more about what you mean by that?"
- "Did I hear you correctly? I think you said…"

Have set responses at the ready. It's easy in the moment to feel unable to respond or to find plenty of reasons not to say something: "I don't want to cause a stir," "It's not a big deal," "They're usually a nice person." To counter the instinct to stay silent (which you may later regret), it helps to memorize and rehearse a few go-to phrases that you can use when you do encounter rudeness. For example, "I imagine it wasn't your intention, but that hurt," or "I know we all care about fairness. Acting in this way undermines those intentions."

When you're facing a situation you don't have a ready response for, you can try a simple technique that I picked up from authors W. Brad Johnson and David G. Smith, which is to say "Ouch," clearly and forcefully. This will buy you some time so that you can come up with something further you want to say, and it sends the signal that the other person's actions had a negative impact, giving them a chance to reconsider what they said.

Responses to Rudeness

Sample "I" statements to present your perspective:

- I felt dismissed by your comment; while that may not have been your intention, that's how it landed with me.
- I'm hurt by what you just said.
- I imagine it wasn't your intent, but that made me uncomfortable.
- I don't respond well to being yelled at.
- I understand why you're frustrated.

Sample "It" statements to create boundaries:

• It's disrespectful to tell people their ideas don't have merit.
• That comment isn't helpful to either of us.
• It would be easier for me to help you if we took the heat down in this conversation.

Common responses to rehearse:

• What did you mean by that comment?
• Did I hear you correctly? I think you said...
• Hold on, I need a moment to process what you said.
• Can we step back for a moment?
• I know we both care about getting this done. Can we do that together? I have some ideas.

Show empathy. It's probably the last thing you want to do when you're on the receiving end of meanness, but kindly showing the person that you understand their concerns can often help smooth out a tense interaction. This isn't required, especially if the comment could be categorized as a microaggression, but in a situation with a client or customer who is responding out of frustration or anger, acknowledging that you see their perspective with simple statements like "I get that" or "I understand" can calm them down some. Remember that recognizing the emotion behind their behavior isn't a tacit endorsement of their behavior. You can grant them their premise and ask them to treat you differently.

Anticipate defensiveness. The best-case scenario is that the person hears you and even thanks you for your feedback. But in my experience, they are more likely to get defensive, at least at first. A customer might dismiss what you're saying or claim that you misunderstood them and their intentions. But if they've caused pain, it doesn't matter whether they had good intentions or not.

If they accuse you of being overly sensitive or defend themselves by saying they didn't mean any harm, make clear how their statement or question affected you. For example, you might say, "Your comment, however you meant it, made me feel like you don't respect me."

And be sure you have an exit plan. If you're handling a customer, this might mean completing the transaction with them as quickly and efficiently as possible. If addressing the incivility causes the other person to double down on their comment or even to escalate their behavior, make sure you have a few statements ready to help you get out of the conversation. For example, you might say, "I need to take a break from this conversation," or "Let's press pause on this for now," or "I'm going to finish checking you out so that we can both move on."

Form a coalition. If the rudeness is part of a recurring pattern, you might enlist help from others in responding. Join forces with people on your team or in your company and make an explicit pact to respond to incivility when it happens. When a customer is being rude to you, it can often take the heat down if a coworker intervenes on your behalf or even takes over the interaction. Having a coalition can help you gain clarity as well: When something troubling but ambiguous happens, you, along with everyone else in the group, will have a sounding board to help determine whether it warrants action.

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Let's go back to those opening examples.

With the rude customer, you might ask a question, such as, "I think you just called me incompetent. Did I understand you correctly?" Or you could counter with a clear statement like, "I'll be able to complete your refund in the next 10 minutes." Of course, it's possible the person will

double down rather than recognize the impact they had on you, but at least you've made it clear that you won't tolerate their rude comments.

With the angry parent, you could show empathy and reiterate your intention, "I'm sorry you're frustrated. I can assure you I'm trying to help your child in the best way I know how," and then suggest you meet in person. That often helps to encourage the other person's empathy toward you since they can't hide behind a screen and keyboard.

With your typically friendly colleague who criticized your idea (and maybe your judgment), you might use the approach of explaining the impact of their comment: "I don't think it was your intention but that felt dismissive to me, and truthfully, it stung," or you could simply say, "Ouch" and then stay quiet to give them time to reflect on what they said or clarify what they meant.

At the end of the day, you get to decide what's best for you in every unique circumstance. And while you may not have control over how that person treats you, you *do* have control over when and how you respond.

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Encouraging Good Behavior from Your Customers

Select, train, evaluate — and sometimes fire — people who are rude to your employees. **by Danielle D. van Jaarsveld, David D. Walker, and Su Kyung (Irene) Kim**

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Ryan Snook

Customers interact with service employees daily: buying a coffee, taking an Uber, ordering meal delivery, eating in a restaurant, receiving technical support over the phone, or returning a product using online chat. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, reports on these interactions have shown a decrease in kindness and patience and an increase in incivility toward service employees: rude comments or behavior, refusing to follow instructions, attacks, verbal aggression including threats, and passive aggression, like an eye roll.

Consumer-facing businesses have long lived by the maxim "the customer is always right." But in the current environment, is that still true? And what responsibility do employers have to improve customer behavior toward their employees?

These questions are timely because customer incivility is not a small problem affecting a niche segment of the global workforce. In the United States, for example, service jobs — whether in a traditional industry (airline, hotel, restaurant) or an emerging field (ride hailing, personal concierge, end-of-life doulas) — represent roughly 80% of total employment. Similarly, service work dominates other developed economies, accounting for 72% to 82% of total employment in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Israel.

With service work so prevalent and incivility on the rise, organizations must reframe how they view their customers. Our research — focusing on employee well-being and performance when facing abuse, unreasonable demands, or illegitimate complaints from customers — highlights why corporate cultures that emphasize putting customers first, regardless of bad behavior, are problematic. It also points to improved customer management strategies. In essence, organizations could treat them more like employees, developing strategies to better select, train, evaluate, discipline, and (in some cases) fire them.

When "The Customer Is Always Right" Goes Wrong

Successful retailers such as Harry Gordon Selfridge, John Wanamaker, and Marshall Field spearheaded the customer-is-king, service-with-a-smile approach to service more than a century ago, and for decades, many organizations across industries, including Hewlett-Packard, Ritz-Carlton, Walmart, and Sony adopted similar approaches.

But this model is problematic for two key reasons.

First, it can be damaging to both employees and the business. Workers suffer from the emotional toll of the encounter itself and then, if they push back or speak up, from the repercussions. These might include a bad post-encounter survey score and performance evaluation, a smaller tip, a reduced or less-preferred schedule, a managerial reprimand, or losing their job altogether. Days, months, or even years of being mistreated by a customer will cause employee engagement and performance to falter, resulting in lower customer satisfaction and increased customer and employee attrition.

Second, "the customer is always right" neglects to consider how employee-customer interactions unfold in the real world. Frontline service work often involves coproduction — for example, when customers must know and explain their preferences (to a hairdresser, server, massage therapist, architect), provide account details (call-center interactions, financial transactions), and express their desired changes to products or settings (IT, cell phone, and television support). Even self-service actions (grocery store and other retail transactions, hotel and airline check-ins) are not completely free from interactions with frontline workers. Quality customer service *requires* both participants to provide input and collaborate.

Customers, of course, are not actually employed by the organizations that they seek service from, so managers tend to overlook them as human capital that needs management. But if companies want to support better employee performance, then they must consider ways to improve *customer performance* via selection, training, evaluation, progressive discipline, and potentially dismissal.

Learn to Manage Your Customers

Several organizations are developing policies and procedures designed to proactively protect employees by promoting appropriate customer behavior. Here are some areas of focus.

Selection. Recognize that not all customers are the right ones for your organization, especially ones who behave uncivilly toward employees. While large platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, and Google, for example) must engage with huge audiences, most smaller businesses and entrepreneurs do not. There are many examples of organizations and professionals that "select" their customers: law firms, architectural practices, consultancies, contractors, landscapers, and psychotherapy and physician offices. Among gig workers, Uber and meal-delivery drivers choose which jobs to take, and Airbnb hosts can decline service requests more directly.

In smaller companies, selection can take the form of letting uncivil customers know that you are too busy to serve them or not taking new clients. You can also signal that your organization values frontline workers — and won't tolerate their mistreatment — through product design and marketing, which will help you attract customers who will also adhere to that culture and those values.

To be clear, your customer selection should never be driven by bias but by well-defined expectations for appropriate behavior toward employees.

Training. Just as employees are taught proper procedures for taking an order or responding to a call, customers can be trained to understand acceptable behavior. For example, organizations are increasingly using signage to communicate expectations: The TSA posts signs at airport security checkpoints warning passengers of fines and criminal penalties

for threats, verbal abuse, and physical violence against agents. In June 2022, a Dairy Queen restaurant posted a sign asking customers to be patient and respect their staff, reminding patrons that it is the first job many of them have held. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Pharmacy Guild of Australia offered a downloadable poster to its members indicating a zero-tolerance approach toward aggressive and abusive behaviors against pharmacists.

Other companies use technology to train customers. In Korea, some call centers ask customer service workers' loved ones to record messages or ringback tones that are played before connecting customers to those employees. It is a reminder that the ensuing interaction will be with a real human being, and the intervention has significantly reduced the amount of verbal abuse customer service employees receive.

Evaluation. Traditionally, only employees have been subject to manager and customer evaluations of their performance via reviews and surveys. However, service platforms such as Uber and Airbnb have shown that customers — that is, passengers and renters — can also be rated, and the results are made public. Drivers and hosts may then refuse customers with extremely low ratings or reviews that include accusations of abusive behaviors. These evaluations remind customers that their performance also matters. Formal and informal customer-behavior tracking also appears common in call centers and the restaurant industry.

Regardless of how you evaluate your customers, providing service employees with the ability to indicate when an interaction with a customer has been problematic, and enabling them to take a break, is critical. Social support — whether from a peer, supervisor, or trainer — can go a long way in these situations as well.

Progressive discipline and dismissal. Sometimes even the best selection, training, and evaluation methods cannot discourage uncivil customer behavior. While some employers demand that employees persist through horrible circumstances, others are adopting rules and tools that help employees protect themselves from customer mistreatment. Some call centers in Korea, for example, now have a "right to hang up" policy, which allows an employee, after two warnings, to end a phone call at their discretion when experiencing verbal abuse.

This "right to hang up" is an example of progressive discipline, and organizations can empower their employees to use it in certain abusive customer interactions. Beyond warnings for verbal abuse from customers, some companies allow employees to escalate by making a note on a file, redirecting the interaction to a supervisor, and even issuing fines (depending on the industry).

Ultimately, an organization can choose to end its relationship with an abusive customer. One prominent example is the zero-tolerance policy passed in the United States by the FAA in 2021 to discourage unruly customer behavior on airlines, which involved potential fines or jail time. Companies including Amazon, Chili's, Facebook, Ferrari, JetBlue, Lululemon, McDonald's, Sephora, Tim Hortons, Victoria's Secret, and Wendy's are also "firing" bad customers. While some ban people due to violations of company policies, terms of service, or user agreements, others do so at the discretion of the manager or owner for repeated uncivil behavior.

How customers treat employees is being taken seriously by some governments as well. In 2022, for instance, the UK passed legislation that increased penalties for customers who abuse employees.

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Clearly, the customer is *not* always right. Organizations that value their employees must protect and support them through their customer-service and workplace policies. Doing so starts with recognizing that customers are often coproducers of service and then using strategies adapted from human resource management to ensure customers behave more humanely. This approach will benefit your workforce and your business.

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Content Moderation Is Terrible by Design

A conversation about how to fix the front lines of the internet.
by Thomas Stackpole

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Sarah T. Roberts Portrait: Studio Bon

When people talk about content moderation, they typically reference debates about free speech and censorship. The people who actually do the moderating, however, tend to be an afterthought. Their work is largely invisible — hidden away in call center–type offices — as they filter the deluge of user-generated content on social media platforms. Even though users don't see them, these employees are the internet's frontline workers, facing the worst of human nature one disturbing picture or video at a time. Without them, social media companies — and

their ad-driven business models — likely couldn't exist as they do now. Yet in addition to the constant exposure to unpleasant content, these jobs tend to be poorly paid, contingent, and full of pressure to perform quickly and accurately. But do they have to be so bad?

Sarah T. Roberts, faculty director of the Center for Critical Internet Inquiry and associate professor of gender studies, information studies, and labor studies at UCLA, is an expert on content moderation work. She talked to HBR about why these jobs are often terrible by design, what alternative models might look like, and how we might make these essential frontline jobs better. This interview has been edited.

When did content moderation become a job, and how has it evolved?
It started in the early days of social media; even MySpace recognized the need for a professional moderation staff in the early aughts. Around 2010, sites like Facebook were in their relative infancy, as was the idea that user-generated content could fuel engagement. But when you open the gate to let anyone upload pictures or videos, you get the gamut of human self-expression. Some of the results are inappropriate, disturbing, or illegal and certainly could pose a problem for a firm that's concerned about liability or simply brand management. Companies initially used a patchwork approach to moderation: They had people in-house who were doing the work — both contractors and employees — but they also outsourced it to third parties, including other firms and digital piecework platforms, like Mechanical Turk, to meet demand.

When I was doing my doctoral degree at the University of Illinois, I read an article about people in rural Iowa who were working in what sounded like a call center — but instead of responding to service inquiries, they were reviewing whether the content that users were posting on social media conformed to a given site's guidelines. At the time, I'd been using the internet for 20 years, and I'd never considered that a human intermediary might be making these decisions as a job, for pay.

It dawned on me that if your job is to look for and remove things that are disturbing to other people, repeated exposure to that kind of material had to be difficult.

Today each social media company has its own, incredibly detailed set of policies that are always changing and being refined, and the call center model has really won out. Moderators responsible for implementing those policies work in large-scale, outsourced, industrialized, call center–like offices, often in regions of the world where labor is much less expensive than in the U.S. The companies favor this kind of relationship. It sets up a convenient kind of plausible deniability for some of the harms that can come from the work.

What does a content moderator's typical day look like?

When you're a frontline generalist working for a third-party contracting company, you typically come into a fairly sterile environment. You probably don't have your own workspace, because there are three shifts, so someone else will be sitting in your spot when you clock out. You probably log into a proprietary system or interface developed by the company that needs the moderation, and you start to access queues of materials.

A flagged piece of content is served to you — there might be some contextual information, or there might be very little — and you make a judgment call about whether to delete the content based on your interpretation of the company's policies. When you close the case, you get another one. This is your process throughout the day, working through the queue. Sometimes there's specialization — someone may work specifically on hate speech or self-harm content, for example — but even the run-of-the-mill cases that generalists deal with can be pretty awful. Just think about the kinds of things that aren't permitted on a site: Those are often the things that these folks see.

How have moderators you've talked to felt about these jobs?

One woman told me that she saw herself in the folkloric role of a "sin-eater." The gist of this historical ritual is that a poor person spiritually takes on the sins of a deceased person, usually by eating a loaf of bread that has been passed over the corpse, in exchange for money. The woman felt that in doing content moderation she was, in essence, taking on the misbehavior, the cruelty, and the violence of others for pay; the metaphor really resonated with me. Other moderators made analogies to being a janitor or a trash collector — people who deal with the refuse, the detritus.

Is it just the content that makes the work hard, or do moderators face other challenges?

On top of dealing with the actual content, moderators are probably using an interface that hasn't been updated recently, because engineering resources go toward developing new products and functionality for customers. Improving the experience for content moderators is never at the top of a company's to-do list. For example, an old interface might respond slowly to moderators' commands, preventing them from reviewing flagged content as efficiently as they'd like to. That means workers might have to look at an image for longer than is necessary or watch all of a disturbing video, which contributes to the stress of the job.

Another challenge is in how moderators are evaluated, which is usually on two metrics. One is productivity: how many cases you get through. The second is accuracy: If a supervisor reviewed the cases that you resolved, would they agree with your decisions? So there's pressure to get your cases done quickly but also to get them right.

This work also pays poorly, especially compared with other tech-sector jobs. I think a lot of people go in thinking, "I'll be working in social media, and that's the start of a career." But it's bottom-rung work that

is often denigrated and dismissed, and it's incredibly difficult to do over the long term.

What about automation? Could software and algorithmic models do this work?

As the need for content moderation has grown, companies have invested in machine learning algorithms, natural language processing, and other automation tools. But instead of shrinking the number of people involved, this shift has actually expanded it. Companies need workers to annotate data sets of images or other kinds of media that will be used to train the tools, and human beings still have to check whether the algorithms got the decisions right.

There has long been an aspirational idea that we're going to turn repetitive, disturbing, or unpleasant labor over to machines. Instead, what's happened with content moderation is that this work has just been pushed out of sight. Automation doesn't lend itself to moderation beyond rote cases such as spam or content that has already been identified in a database, because the work is nuanced and requires linguistic and cultural competencies. For example, does a certain symbol have special meaning or is it just a symbol? Someone might see the Black Sun, a Nazi symbol, as just a geometric design unless they were familiar with its context, as well as the context in which it is being deployed. Machines cannot match humans in this regard.

Are there any other alternatives to the current system?

If social media companies continue to employ the same business model they've been using, I don't really see the need for the moderation role dissipating anytime soon. But many things could be done to improve the experience for workers: upgrading their technology, enhancing their user experience, giving them greater control over what they see, and letting them say "Hey, I need a break" without penalty. A lot of companies pay lip service to that latter practice, but many moderators

have told me they don't seek support because it means letting their boss know they're having difficulty with a central function of their work. When I ask workers what they would change, they always say "Pay us more" and "Value us more." There's a widespread lack of recognition in terms of what these individuals do on behalf of the rest of us.

In sectors besides tech, recently we've seen workers unionize to demand improvements, and that could be an option for moderators if companies don't make the job better. These people are providing a mission-critical service for their employers. Platforms make money by giving advertisers access to as many users as possible, which creates the need for content moderation as a brand protection, because no company wants its ads featured next to a beheading video.

A more controversial solution is to rethink the way social media platforms are designed. Should they really be empty vessels for people to fill up with invective, fights over politics, disinformation, propaganda, racism and misogyny, and other garbage? Is it actually a good thing for two billion people to be using the same communication network? There's no preordained reason that the platforms look the way they do, other than the desire for scale and profit.

Are any platforms doing moderation well?

It's hard for me to not romanticize the early internet. God knows I was outraged by many things and sometimes fought with people — all the behavior that we associate with online discourse today. But early internet communities did have governance models that people could opt in or opt out of. Some sites were anarchic, avoiding rules and having an "anything goes" approach; it's important to recognize the absence of rules as a governance choice that influenced the culture of a site. On other sites, there were very strict rules, and if you didn't follow them, you would be booted. Often in those cases people doing moderation had visible leadership roles and were curating a particular kind of cultural

space with an authority granted to them by the users. There are still sites with similar models.

Consider Reddit. On each subreddit, or topic forum, you have community leader–moderators and clear rules about what is acceptable and how violators will be penalized. Each subreddit sets itself up differently, and users can decide whether to participate. Then, at a higher level, you have professional moderators who deal with things such as requests for information from law enforcement agencies or governments. This kind of model is in sharp contrast to the one in which content moderation is mostly invisible and unacknowledged.

What else have you learned from the moderators you've talked to?
Right now, a lot of the collective intelligence that moderators gain from being on the front lines of the internet is lost. There's no effective feedback loop for them to tell their employers what they're seeing, such as trends and warning signs. I've talked to moderators who were probably some of the first people outside the U.S. State Department to know about certain conflict zones, with nowhere to go with that information.

Business ideas could also be gathered from these workers around how to improve online rules or better serve the public. But because moderators are at a remove organizationally, and often geographically, and because communication lines with leadership are nonexistent or broken, they're seen as automatons who enforce extant rules — not as valued employees with knowledge to contribute to the larger ecosystem. That strikes me as a real missed opportunity.

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Fear and Stress on the Job

Workers and managers explain why incivility is a company problem, not an individual one — and how to address it. **by Laura Amico**

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Anton Vierietin/Getty Images

Screaming restaurant customers. Pool patrons carrying around copies of a facility's rules. Families of hospital patients yelling and threatening to sue. These are all real-life examples of what frontline workers around the world have experienced — all of them disheartening.

When HBR asked our readers about their experiences with incivility at work, we got dozens of detailed responses from both employees and managers and noticed a disconnect. While bosses said they work hard to protect their teams, the workers themselves reported not getting enough support. Sure, some team leaders handle incidents in the short term,

expelling the restaurant diner, ignoring the rules stickler, and calming the patient's family. But they don't pay as much attention to the long-term toll these interactions take on employees' job performance and mental health. Many employees also noted that they didn't feel they could talk about uncivil customers, patients, or clients with their managers; others said their senior leaders seemed uncaring.

Consider just a few of the comments we received:

"It makes you feel disrespected and sometimes fearful."

"I can't relax anymore, and I immediately feel all my muscles become hard, like my body is preparing to fight. I try to come back to normal by controlling my breath."

"It stresses you out. I hate my job, but I can't afford to quit."

"My manager is not capable of solving such a problem. I'm left all on my own, drown[ing] in anxiety."

"Managers usually agree with patients because they don't want any drama to become bigger."

"The corporate leadership doesn't give a crap about how anyone is treated, so they are likely to tell us just to suck it up and get the revenue."

However, the managers who responded to our survey seemed to have a better understanding of what their frontline workers are dealing with — in part because they have *also* been on the receiving end of incivility. Managers have crafted specific solutions to defuse and destress that other team leaders can learn from and implement.

First, when witnessing a confrontation, managers back up their employees. Second, they encourage open communication so people feel comfortable reporting problems. Finally, they have procedures for responding to incidents. We're highlighting some of the strategies that managers shared with us (the comments have been lightly edited), although we should note that nearly all survey respondents — workers and managers — requested anonymity, revealing just how difficult it is to talk candidly about bad behavior on the part of the people your organization serves.

On Standing Up for Staff

"I will speak to a poorly behaving client privately so that I don't create an embarrassing situation but clearly draw the boundary for acceptable and unacceptable behavior."

"I try to defuse the angry person quickly and get them out of the store. If they are sexist, racist, etc., I advise them of our policy against this behavior and ask them to leave. Sometimes you have to threaten to call the police, but that's very rare."

"I back the frontline workers 100%. I explain to the person that their actions have created the consequences. They often try to blame it on us or staff. I never allow that."

"We exercise a zero-tolerance policy at work, and I always support my team."

"I typically step in and try to mediate. I let my staff know they are not to be mistreated and that they can ask anyone to leave the premises."

On Maintaining Open Communication

"They bring problems with customers to my attention. Sometimes we learn that we need to change a policy or pivot from these interactions."

"I start by calming the employee down. After that, I find out what the problem was."

"I have an open-door policy. I provide my team with time to reflect and consider different ways of handling difficult situations. Depending on the situation, counseling and staff care services are available. Patient safety is paramount; however, the personal and psychological safety of staff is essential."

"Those who are in lower positions feel like they can't speak up [or they will be] judged for being too sensitive or causing hassle. I say, 'If you notice something, say something.'"

"I tell my staff to always come forward. Always tell us. Never allow others to pressure you and [make you] feel unsafe. Call out bad behavior."

On Following Up

"I approach and listen to them, ask what led up to the situation, how they feel about it, how they handled it, and let them know that I am in their corner. I also talk to the other person to listen to their point of view. I usually try to get the parties together and work through the issue. If it's an egregious violation, I ask the employee's permission to involve HR."

"I collect contact information and send follow-up emails."

"The situation is fully documented and an incident form is discussed at weekly governance and daily safety brief huddles. I always ensure there is follow-up with the employee or team and help them manage traumatic situations. Certain situations will be discussed at the senior level, with action plans put in place to reduce or mitigate additional risk to employees."

Putting All Three Tactics to Work

The three tactics the managers described — intervening in the moment, encouraging candor, and having a process for responding to incivility — all empower frontline workers in difficult positions. But these strategies are also about doing good business.

As one frontline worker explained, "Look out for your staff, and they will work harder for you."

Want to tell us about YOUR experiences? The questionnaire is still open. Although we won't be publishing any more responses in this Big Idea, we'd love to hear from you.

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CEOs Have Lost Touch with Frontline Workers

How executives can reconnect with the people who make their businesses run. **by Bill George**

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Nurses at a Minnesota hospital walked off the job on Monday, September 12, 2022, for a three-day strike.
John Autey/MediaNews Group/St. Paul Pioneer Press via Getty Images

When I was the CEO of Medtronic, I established a 30/30/30/10 target for my time — 30% with customers, 30% with frontline employees, 30% with executives, and 10% with external constituencies. That made me an outlier.

According to an in-depth time study by Harvard Business School professors Michael Porter and Nitin Nohria, CEOs spend, on average, just 6% of their time with frontline teams, only 3% with customers, and 72% in meetings. "CEOs face a real risk of operating in a bubble and never seeing the actual world their workers face," the authors note. "Spending time with the rank and file, and with savvy external frontline constituencies, is…an indispensable way to gain reliable information on what is really going on in the company and in the industry."

Two-plus years of coping with Covid-19 has shown how essential frontline workers are to a functioning economy. But many executives have not yet absorbed that lesson. In my experience, frontline workers are making the greatest difference in terms of customer satisfaction, innovation, product quality, and service excellence. Yet they're commonly treated as a cost to be managed rather than an asset to empower and support. Instead of building on this asset, managers cut costs by reducing the number of frontline workers with layoffs or through outsourcing and automation, as employers shift production overseas. That strategy backfired for many restaurants and retailers over the past two years, as Covid, stimulus payments, and a tight labor market left businesses understaffed.

To change the role of frontline employees and how executives view them, I propose two shifts — one symbolic and one practical.

First, the symbolic: It's time to flip the org chart. Why do these charts put frontline workers on the bottom and CEOs and C-suite executives on top, when frontline workers are making the most difference? It's because executives and corporate staffers see their roles as *directing* and *controlling* the people doing the actual work.

Instead, companies should put frontline workers on top with corporate staffers, executives, and CEOs beneath them to reflect their proper roles of *coaching* and *supporting* the front line rather than controlling its members. The simple, symbolic, visual change will help everyone in an organization remember where value comes from: customers and the employees closest to them.

Second, the practical: CEOs should spend more of their time with frontline workers. I recommend aiming for 30%, as I did at Medtronic. Although it was difficult to maintain that balance, I came close by scheduling customer visits and frontline visits first and then filling in my schedule with internal and external meetings.

Why do this? First, because paying more attention to frontline workers brings critical motivational benefits. In Medtronic's R&D labs I got many valuable ideas for new products and new medical therapies. In visits to its factories I realized that it was the assembly workers — not the quality department — who made the difference in the quality of our products. Second, my time with customers taught me about the company's product challenges and demonstrated the value of our frontline technical sales and service people.

That time helped me be a better CEO, both because I learned what I needed to do to support our employees and because my decision-making was infused with firsthand understanding of our customers and operations.

Several of today's exceptional leaders are shifting their focus from the front office to the front line. Here are a few examples:

Former Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly

As the new CEO of Best Buy, Hubert Joly spent his first week on the job not at headquarters, where the company faced myriad financial problems, but in its St. Cloud, Minnesota, stores, where he interacted with employees and customers wearing a "CEO in Training" badge. He says, "What I learned…listening to store employees and observing what was going on in the store, I could never have fathomed poring over spreadsheets or sitting in meeting rooms with other executives at HQ." As CEO, he personally met with thousands of employees to inspire them to engage in Best Buy's "Renew Blue" turnaround strategy. He also was able to avoid layoffs by cutting overhead costs and partnering with suppliers.

After three years, when Best Buy's turnaround was complete, he created a new initiative with the theme "Build the New Blue" and met with employees to empower them. He says, "The heart of business is the idea of pursuing a noble purpose, putting people at the center, creating the environment where you can release that human magic, embrace all stakeholders, and treat profit as an outcome." As a result of his efforts over seven years, Best Buy returned to growth and its stock price increased 263%.

General Motors CEO Mary Barra

Starting as an 18-year-old co-op student, Barra has worked for GM for 41 years, including in frontline jobs as manufacturing engineer, factory inspector, and design engineer before she rose into management.

Immediately upon becoming CEO, she was confronted with GM's ignition-switch crisis, which caused 124 deaths and 275 injuries. She used that crisis and the urgency surrounding it to transform GM's culture from a slow-moving bureaucracy that denied its problems to a customer-focused, transparent one that owned its challenges. She

aligned employees around GM's Triple Zero purpose of "zero emissions, zero accidents, zero congestion."

Barra challenges every employee to produce top-quality, safe vehicles — and she acts on her convictions. To emphasize the importance of safety to every GM employee, in her first year she committed to establishing a new industry standard for quality and safety, recalling 30 million vehicles. Next she created Speak Up for Safety, a program that rewards frontline employees for transparency.

Barra also frequently meets with factory employees to determine whether cultural changes are taking hold and offers to help whenever possible. "If we want to change this elusive culture, it requires changing behaviors, because that defines the culture," she says. Barra's efforts have paid off as GM has restored its profitability in all but one of the past eight years.

Asymmetric Holdings Founder Jonathan Lee Kelly

Kelly, who grew up in a working-class Black family in Greensboro, North Carolina, worked on construction sites as a teenager. There he learned the value of a frontline job. Now that he owns his own food-service business, Asymmetric Holdings, he is creating a culture focused on treating everybody with respect and recognizing dignity in all work. His company has a history of diversity and inclusion: Women, underrepresented groups, and LGBTQ+ employees regularly move from frontline work into leadership roles both at and above the store level, with compensation materially higher than competitors'.

When he first acquired a food-service chain, Kelly would leave dinner at home to work with the team to close a store. "The next morning, I was at a store and had to grab feces out of the clogged toilet," he says. "If I ask people to do it, I have to do the same thing. I want my employees to be

able to create a better way of life for themselves. I have people working for me who are thriving and have opportunities they never would have had in other organizations."

As these examples show, a mindset shift is occurring in corporate leadership, and the stakes are high for everyone involved. Most important, recentering corporate leadership on the front lines could help combat the rise of income inequality. In the 40 years from 1979 to 2019, compensation for frontline workers rose only 16%, while productivity increased 60%. In the same time frame, the top 1% of employees saw 160% growth in compensation. Thus the gap is widening between CEOs and frontline workers: In 2020 it was 351:1 compared with only 21:1 back in 1965.

Meanwhile, the minimum wage in the United States remains stuck at $7.25 an hour, well below that in most European nations. These trends have left many people in the once-thriving American middle class bitter and angry as they struggle to survive. Public policy has a major role to play in addressing these trends, but corporate leadership can help. Research by MIT's Zeynep Ton has shown that the way jobs are crafted can affect both productivity and compensation. In short, if companies listen more to frontline workers and invest in them, they'll get more in return.

Companies can benefit through improved employee engagement, reduced turnover, and increased customer satisfaction — which in turn will power revenue growth and higher levels of profit. Too many of my peers in the C-suite still don't recognize this. Despite the examples I've cited, not enough executives have realized the importance of frontline workers and their potential to transform businesses. My challenge to them is simple: Get out of your office and spend more time on the front lines.

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