

Five Subtle Ways that “Civil” Leaders Act in “Less than Civil” Ways

Leadership Montgomery Homecoming
Bruce D. Johnson, President
Make it Remarkable LLC

Introduction

A calm and respectable lady went into the pharmacy, walked right up to the pharmacist, looked straight into his eyes, and said, "I'd like to buy some cyanide." The pharmacist asked, "Why in the world would you need cyanide?" The lady replied, "Because I need it to poison my husband." "The pharmacist's eyes got big, and then he exclaimed, "I can't give you cyanide to kill your husband! That's against the law! I would lose my license! They'll throw both of us in jail! Absolutely not! You CANNOT have any cyanide!" The lady reached into her purse and pulled out a picture of her husband in bed with the pharmacist's wife. The pharmacist took one look at the picture and replied, "Well, you didn't tell me that you had a prescription."

Well, I'm confident that all of us can relate to that concept of believing one thing to be true, until we're confronted with the evidence, in this case a different picture, which then leads us to a different conclusion. In other words, what we often believe to be true at first, may not always be. And my guess is that experience might be true for many of us here this evening, especially concerning our theme for this coming year.

Now, my goal is not to embarrass anyone here this evening, so don't raise your hands. But when you heard that this year's Leadership Montgomery theme was on the concept of civility, how many of you thought, "Why did they pick that topic? Are most of our Leadership Montgomery leaders so bad at leading that we need to spend an entire year talking about being more civil?" I don't know all of our Leadership Montgomery graduates, but the people I do know seem to be pretty nice. So what gives? Why do we need to spend an entire year focused on this idea of civility?

Well maybe the reason this topic seems so disjointed from reality for many of us is because of the picture we have in our minds of what civility looks like. Simply put, for most of us, if we're honest, civility looks like what we do. And uncivility or incivility looks like what someone else does. Why? Apart from the fact that we all like to think highly of ourselves, I'd suggest that it's because for most of us, uncivil behavior looks like extremes. For example, how many of you have watched the TV show, Hell's Kitchen, with Chef Gordon Ramsey? Even if you haven't, I'm sure you can imagine the prototypical uncivil leader who's constantly shouting in someone's else's face, dressing them down in front of the rest of the team, while unloading a whole plane load full of F-bombs on them. In our minds, Gordon Ramsey, or someone like him, is our picture of uncivil behavior. And since we don't do that, we must be, by definition, civil.

However, the problem with that line of thinking is that civility isn't a person. Civility is a concept. It's an idea. It's an ideal. So, if you and I will change out the picture of Gordon Ramsey (or someone like him) and replace that picture with the ideal of civility, chances are we'll begin to realize that we're not as civil as we think we are. And more important to the task at hand, you and I will begin to discover that some of our "less than civil" behaviors really are getting in the way of us being effective as leaders.

So, if you're here this evening and you'd like to be a better leader. Or if you'd like to be more civil in your interactions with those around you. Or if you'd like to experience less conflict on your teams. Or if you'd like to do a better job at developing the people whom you're leading, then I'd like to encourage you to listen intently and apply the principles I'm going to share with you this evening as we talk about "Five Subtle Ways that 'Civil' Leaders Act in 'Less than Civil' Ways." So, without further ado, let's dig in.

First of all, let's define civility. Civility is defined on dictionary.com as 1. Courteous behavior; politeness. 2. Showing proper regard for others. That's helpful, but hard to get our hands around. So, what I like to do when I'm trying to change something in my life is I like to take a look at the opposite of what I want to do, because I think the easiest way to make change in our lives is to first stop doing what's getting in the way of us doing what we want to do—before I add new behaviors into the mix. In essence, I fundamentally believe, and my clients hear this all the time, it's best to subtract before we add. Because if we don't subtract first, even if we add a new behavior, the problem behavior will get in the way.

That said, what's the opposite of civility? Answer: incivility or uncivility. And what is incivility? It's rudeness. It's inappropriateness. It's disrespectfulness. And it's not showing proper regard for others. Bingo. That last definition is the pay dirt for us as leaders.. In other words, if you and I want to be more civil leaders, we need to eliminate anything from our lives that hinders us from showing proper regard for those whom we lead. And if we stop engaging in those behaviors that cause us to not show proper regard, we will, by definition, be more civil.

So what are some of those “less than civil” ways of acting that we need to eliminate?

Less than Civil Way # 1. Adding Too Much Value.

This past summer I picked up a book by Marshall Goldsmith entitled, “What Got You Here Won't Get You There,” which is a book that looks at 22 ways that leaders need to change the way they act in order to get to the next level. Once I got to this principle in his book, I knew I'd received my money's worth—and my guess is that you will too—without having to buy the book.

So, here's the scenario. You have an idea and you walk into my office. You're all excited so you share your idea. It's a good idea. However, I'm an idea guy. On Meyers Briggs, I'm a high INTJ. And all good INTJs believe that everything can be improved. So, as soon as you start suggesting your idea, my mind starts cranking out new ideas on how to make it even better. So I say, “That's great. Have you thought about . . . ? And what if you did . . . ? You know, I read an article recently where so and so did something similar; you might want to check it out. Oh, and here are a couple of names of people you might want to contact. Oh, another idea . . .

In my mind, I think I'm adding value. And I might be. My ideas might make your idea better. But when you leave my office, how do you feel? Deflated. You walked in thinking you had a great idea and left with my idea. Furthermore, the probability of you actually implementing the new idea has dropped precipitously because you're no longer motivated by it. In other words, by adding too much value, I didn't show proper regard for you and your ideas. I basically communicated to you, my ideas are better than yours.

So what's the solution? Answer: The next time someone presents an idea to you, that is a decent idea—not a bad idea, just say, “Great idea” (period-don't add anything). If you want, you can follow it up with, “Is there any way I can help you?” or, “Do you need anything from me?” If we need to help coach them later, that's fine. But in that meeting, we need to simply say, “Great idea!” and leave it there. So as you take a look at your leadership, how many times have you been guilty of adding too much value to your employees?

Less than Civil Way # 2. Asking for Input and Then Shooting Down Their Suggestions

Now, I'm sure none of you have ever done this, right? Buzz. Okay, we've all done this. So let me suggest one reason why we often do this. As leaders, we all know we're supposed to “create buy in” from those we lead. According to the official guidebook for leading, when we're in a meeting, we're not supposed to dominate the discussion, we're supposed to foster collegiality. However, in reality, most of us think we know more than the people we lead. After all, we are the leader (Hello! ☺). In addition, we have so much to get done, that we really just want to make the decision and move on, but we feel

obligated to ask our people what they think because, according to the official guidebook of leading, we're supposed to ask. In other words, we don't really want their opinions and ideas – which is why we keep shooting down all of their ideas in the first place. Why? Because if all of their ideas are shot down, what idea is left? Exactly, the one we had before the meeting – which once again proves why we are the leader. It's almost comical when we really observe what we're doing. But it happens all the time. And when we do it, it doesn't show proper regard for the people we lead.

So, what's the solution? Answer: When someone responds to one of our questions, we need to simply say, "Thank you! Any more ideas?" In addition, and this is key, make sure every idea is written down (because if we don't write it down, they'll think, "In one ear, out the other"). Now, if you and I need to help someone understand that their idea isn't workable, then it's time to put our Socrates on and ask them questions to lead them to understanding why their idea probably isn't the best. However, by asking questions rather than by shooting down their ideas, we can still affirm them for their willingness to answer our question, plus we've just helped them to think at a higher level. So as you look at your leadership, how often are you guilty of asking for input and then shooting down the suggestions your people make?

Less than Civil Way # 3. Expecting the Worst.

My guess is that all of us here know the principle, "We get not what we want but what we expect in life." But knowing something to be true and practicing it are two different things, aren't they? So, here's the scenario. My guess is that there is someone in your workplace who doesn't perform up to your standards? Moreover, chances are, they haven't done so for a long time. In other words, day after day for months or even years on end, they've fallen short of your standards. Based on that history, don't you think that it's highly probable that the next time you assign them a task; you're going to assume that they'll fail you again? Absolutely! And guess what, they probably will.

However, as leaders, you and I are forced to continually ask ourselves the question, "What part in their lack of performance do I play?" In other words, if people, in general, perform in line with our expectations of them, whether those expectations are spoken or not, could we be playing a role in our employee's lack of performance? Maybe? Maybe not? But this much is clear; expecting the worst from someone isn't showing proper regard for them.

So, what's the solution? Answer: To consciously choose to believe the best, and I say consciously choose because our unconscious expectation of a low performer is that they'll fail. In other words, as leaders you and I need to know that we did our very best at developing the people on our teams. And if we've done everything we can, including believing the best of them and they still fail, then we know it's time to let them go. But if it's our expectations that are getting in the way, then we need to change them. So, as you look at your leadership, who in your workplace do you struggle with believing the best of? And how can you turn that around?

Less than Civil Way # 4. Treating Everyone the Same.

This may not sound uncivil, but it is. Let me explain. Unless you're very deliberate about your leadership, chances are you like to lead people either the way you like to be led or in the easiest and quickest manner possible for you. Either way, chances are you probably like to lead everyone the same way. So, for example, if you like someone to just give you a general idea of what they want and then let you run with it, chances are you like to lead your whole team that way. Or, on the opposite side, if you're a very rules oriented kind of person, chances are you like to lead everyone by giving them lots of rules.

However, whenever you and I treat everyone the same way, we are by definition, not showing proper regard for them and their individuality (i.e. we're being uncivil). For me as a leader to expect that everyone thinks like me or likes what I like or feels like I feel or wants to be led the same why I want to be led is simply faulty leadership thinking.

So, what's the solution? Answer: We need to practice situational leadership – and I'm not just talking about the theory of situational leadership as described by Ken Blanchard (though if you're unfamiliar with it, you should pick up "Putting the One Minute Manager to Work" It's a great book). However, what I'm talking about is basing your leadership on the situation at hand. If Joe is an SJ in Meyers Briggs terminology, you should know that it will be virtually impossible for him to create something from scratch. So to lead Joe, you should know that you're going to need to give him some more definition. However, if Sally is an NT, then you should know that filling in too many of the blanks will stifle her. You need to give her more latitude. In other words, as leaders, the most civil way for us to lead is to change our leadership style based on the situation at hand, their personality, the task, their talents, their schedule, etc. So, as you look at your own leadership, how often do you change your leadership style to match what your direct reports need?

Less than Civil Way # 5. Not Clearly Communicating Expectations.

About a year and a half ago, because of a mutual friend, I had the privilege of spending a weekend with Ken Blanchard, and his wife Margie, at Cornell University. At one point, while we were watching a movie together, Ken leaned over and said to me, "Bruce, you know, it's been almost twenty-five years since I published, 'The One Minute Manager,' yet when I walk into just about any company in America and ask their employees, 'Do you know what's expected of you?' over 90 percent of them say, 'No.' It's been almost a quarter of a century since I told managers they have only three things to do – and still that message hasn't gotten through." So let me ask you, if Ken came to your company or organization and asked the people you lead the same question, how many of them would say, "Yes, I can clearly articulate what's expect of me?" My guess is that it's a smaller number than most of us would like to admit.

And therein is the problem. We, as leaders, get frustrated with our people because they're not getting everything done that we expect them to get done in the way we expect them to get it done. And they're on the other side frustrated because they don't really know what they're expected to do. Even worse, some of us keep changing our expectations so that no matter what's written down or agreed to, we're not expecting that anymore but something else, which we haven't clearly communicated. All of which shows a clear lack of regard for the people we're leading.

So, what's the solution? Answer: 1. We need to get clarity on our expectations and write them down. I can't tell you how many clients I run into who complain about a problem employee and when I ask them, "Well, do they have a job description?" "No," If they do I ask, "Has it been updated in the last five to ten years?" "No." Well, do you operate from a set of agreed upon quarterly and yearly goals and plans?" "No" And then we wonder why we're frustrated ☺ In addition, as leaders, we all have expectations for how we want our people to work. For example, when I led Seneca Creek, I used to hand out a sheet to new employees on day one with a list of all of "Bruce's Idiosyncrasies," so that, as an employee, you never had to wonder, "I wonder what Bruce thinks or expects of me." It was written down. 2. Make sure you clearly communicate those expectations. And writing them down is not communicating them. Until you've had an eyeball-to-eyeball conversation where they can repeat back the expectation, communication hasn't really occurred. 3. Hold them accountable to the written, not unwritten, expectations. You hate it, just like they do, when someone evaluates us on something other than what was agreed to – and so do they. So, as you look at your leadership, would you say you do a great job of communicating your expectations, an average job or not-so-great job at communicating what you expect? And, as a follow up, would the people you lead agree with your answer to the last question?

You see, even though you and I may not be Gordon Ramsey's, "Civil" leaders like us can act in "Less than Civil Ways." And hopefully, as you leave here tonight, you're leaving with a different picture than when you walked in. But more importantly, I hope you're leaving with a new prescription for how you can be a better, more civil leader. So, in review, if you want to be a more civil leader tomorrow;

1. When someone brings in a new idea say, "Great idea!" and stop there.
2. When you ask for input, say, "Thanks!" and write the idea down.
3. When you walk into work tomorrow, expect the best of all of your employees.

4. When you have to assign something to someone, practice situational leadership with them based on who they are and the situation at hand.
5. As you go about leading your team, make sure you clearly communicate what you expect of them and don't keep it a secret.

If you'll do those five things, I'm confident that you'll not only be a more civil person, but you'll be a better leader, your team will be more productive, and you'll experience less conflict—a perfect trifecta if you ask me. So what do you need to do tomorrow to be a more civil leader? Whatever it is, do it!

Thank you.

For additional information contact,

Bruce D. Johnson, President
Make it Remarkable LLC
Consulting, Speaking and Executive Coaching
P.O. Box 243
Germantown, MD 20874
301-602-0448 (w)
240-536-9175 (f)
bruce@brucedjohnson.com
<http://www.brucedjohnson.com>
<http://www.brucedjohnson.net> (blog)

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