

WORKPLACE INCIVILITY: SMALL BEHAVIOURS, BIG IMPACT ON TEAMS

Workplace incivility—rude or discourteous behaviour that violates norms of mutual respect—is often dismissed as minor or low-impact. Defined as a “low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457), it is subtler than bullying and often underestimated in its impact.

Unlike more overt mistreatment, incivility may seem fleeting, with many employees appearing to move on from initial feelings of anger, frustration, or confusion within days or weeks. However, research by Dr. Ao Zhou (Ollie) from the University of Waikato uncovers its lasting and damaging effects at the team level.

Drawing on data from 13 public sector organisations in New Zealand, Zhou’s study shows that even when individuals recover from the emotional impact of rudeness, incivility can linger in teams—corrupting collaboration, trust, and cohesion. These seemingly “small” behaviours fuel psychological withdrawal, tit-for-tat dynamics, gossip, and team fragmentation such as factions and isolations. The impact is amplified during times of change—especially during organizational restructurings or redundancies.

The study also highlights how leadership can either exacerbate or contain the spread of incivility based on international evidence from China and New Zealand. Ineffective leaders—those who avoid conflict, delay action, or lack capability—create environments where incivility festers. In contrast, effective leaders act quickly, apply fair and consistent standards, and handle disputes with confidence and assertiveness.

For practitioners, the implications are clear:

- Recruitment and selection should prioritise leaders with strong conflict-resolution skills.
- Training and development should focus on equipping managers to address issues early and effectively.
- Culture-building efforts should promote respect and forgiveness, encouraging employees to reset relationships and move forward.



In closing, what may appear to be a minor act of rudeness can quietly undermine team dynamics over time. Awareness and proactive leadership are essential to preventing lasting harm.

If you'd like to learn more about this research or other projects related to workplace wellbeing and work relationships, please contact Ao Zhou at o.zhou@waikato.ac.nz

References:

Andersson, L. M., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of management review*, 24(3), 452-471.