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Baylor University

HANKAMER SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

# Eliminating Toxicity through Servant Leadership

*Mitchell J. Neubert, PhD, Emily M. Hunter, PhD, and Remy C. Tolentino, MSN*

Incivility, rudeness, and a general disrespect for others has risen steeply in the workplace in recent years. The harmful effects of such incivility are yet to be fully uncovered and may be worse than originally predicted by researchers. The impacts of workplace incivility affect not only employees but also customers and third parties in contact with employees.



Thankfully, recent research has shown that leaders are not helpless in counteracting hostile work environments. Servant leaders, those who put the needs of others above their own, serve as a critical force in preventing group-level incivility through promoting a virtuous work climate.

## About Our Study

Our study dives into the effects servant leadership can have on a workplace environment. Social learning theory hypothesizes that employees learn and repeat what they see and hear their leaders do. A virtuous climate is thus created from employees' shared experiences in working for and with a servant leader. The intent of this study is to clearly understand the relationship between servant leadership and incivility and to provide practical advice for the real estate industry in reducing workplace incivility and its direct and indirect toxic effects.

## Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is characteristically others-oriented. Simply put, a servant leader's focus is follower growth and development, as well as a genuine care for others outside the organization. Servant leaders see the growth and flourishing of an employee or associated individual as a worthwhile ambition in and of itself. Typically, this leader has a strong faith in employees' capabilities, a positive outlook on employees' future prospects, and demonstrates genuine care and concern for subordinates. Servant leaders lead by example, letting actions speak for themselves, which thus sets the tone for acceptable and affirmed behaviors.

In past research, servant leadership has been linked to virtues that include: prudence, temperance, justice, love, faith, hope, and courage. Our research confirmed this in finding that servant leadership was related to a virtuous climate within work groups based on those seven virtues. Under the influence of a servant leader, employees demonstrated foresight and balance in

decision making. Following the example of a servant leader, these employees demonstrated sincere concern for others, an optimistic approach to work challenges, and were equitable and fair in the treatment of others. Finally, courage was evident within the work group as members followed the model of their leaders in serving others and encouraging empowerment, even at the risk of being eclipsed in status as they promote the flourishing of others.

Within a real estate firm, servant leadership has the potential to not only have a direct positive impact on subordinates, but also an indirect effect on clients and those in secondary social circles.

### **Virtuous Work Environments & Incivility**

Virtuous climates are based on character and a shared concern for self and others. Virtue in the workplace is focused on promoting good and upstanding behavior that advances the betterment and flourishing of others without regard of recognition or reward. These virtues help shape a real estate agent's actions, projects, and processes that help promote virtuousness within a company. Employees learn by means of social information processing, which they then assimilate into their work environment. For this reason, servant leadership has the possibility of promoting civility and at the same time minimizing incivility.

Incivility is notably different from acts of misconduct, troubling behavior, or violence. Simply put, incivility is mistreatment characterized by rudeness, lack of courtesy and disregard for others; it is a violation of mutual respect. Low power groups such as women, children, minorities, etc. have a much higher likelihood of being the targets of incivility. Disrespect in the workplace damages trust and energy created in positive relationships and replaces it with fear that creates irritability, intolerance, and the absence of common courtesies. A lack of common courtesies also decreases communication, which can be detrimental to business units built on collaboration.

In addition, incivility commonly increases emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, withdrawal, an increase in turnover, and general counterproductive work practices. This can spill over to how followers, or in our study, employees treat other stakeholders of the organization such as customers or clients.

### **Managerial Implications**

If generally accepted rudeness in the workplace is not kept in check, it has the potential to generate widespread negative consequences. Incivility does not occur in isolation—it permeates through a work environment that overlooks mistreatment, including sexual harassment and bullying. Often, real estate agents are given the tools to manage incivility, but little is done to actually eliminate incivility in the workplace. We suggest a great first step in eliminating

incivility in the workplace is raising awareness and creating zero-tolerance policies that apply to the organization's entire workforce, regardless of position or title.

Creating a virtuous workplace climate begins with purposefully promoting positive behaviors and clearly communicating acceptable and unacceptable office behavior. Firm managers or team leaders should consider creating a code of ethics as well as an anonymous reporting system for violations of that code, holding each member of the organization responsible. Formal training on the effects of incivility as well as employee conflict resolution training also have the potential to reduce incidents. The success of the creation of a civil environment hinges on leadership. Servant leadership is shown to increase safety, justice, trust, and other-centered behaviors in the workplace, so it is prudent to train leaders at all levels on the principles of servant leadership, such as prioritizing follower well-being, high-quality relationships, and follower empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

Real estate firms should look at more than skillsets when hiring and promoting. Strong moral character and a desire to serve others goes a long way in creating a healthy and civil work environment. Leaders have the opportunity, and more importantly, the responsibility to create a positive work environment. Servant leaders have the unique advantage of not only being proven to reduce workplace incivility, but also to contribute to the creation of a civil climate and a more productive work environment.

## **Recommended Reading**

Neubert, Mitchell J., Emily M. Hunter, and Remy C. Tolentino (2021), "Modeling Character: Servant Leaders, Incivility and Patient Outcomes," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 05 April 2021.

## **About the Authors**

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Dr. Mitchell J. Neubert's (PhD – University of Iowa Tippie College of Business) research interests are focused on understanding how leadership, particularly servant leadership, and ethics affect the performance and well-being of people and organizations. He also is interested in how faith intersects with these research interests. He is the primary investigator on a National Science Foundation grant exploring the relationship of religion and entrepreneurship. He has published in several journals including *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Christian Scholars Review*, *Human Relations*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*. He also is the author of two textbooks and teaches in Baylor's undergraduate and Executive MBA programs.

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Dr. Emily M. Hunter (PhD – University of Houston) teaches organizational behavior to MBA students and runs the National Undergraduate Negotiation Competition. Her research on servant leadership, workday breaks, and work-family conflict has appeared in academic journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management* and *Journal of Organizational Behavior* as well as featured in *The Washington Post*, *Fast Company*, and other media outlets. She is also co-author of the book "Organized Innovation: A Blueprint for Renewing America's Prosperity."

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Remy C. Tolentino (MSN – University of Texas at Arlington) was appointed vice president of nursing workforce and leadership development in January 2008 after serving as CNO at Baylor Dallas for eight years. In this role, she is responsible for the development and implementation of the Baylor System Nursing Leadership Academy, supporting leadership development and succession planning. She also oversees nursing workforce strategy in collaboration with human resources, partnerships with the school of nursing, Magnet standards, and processes and shared governance.



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