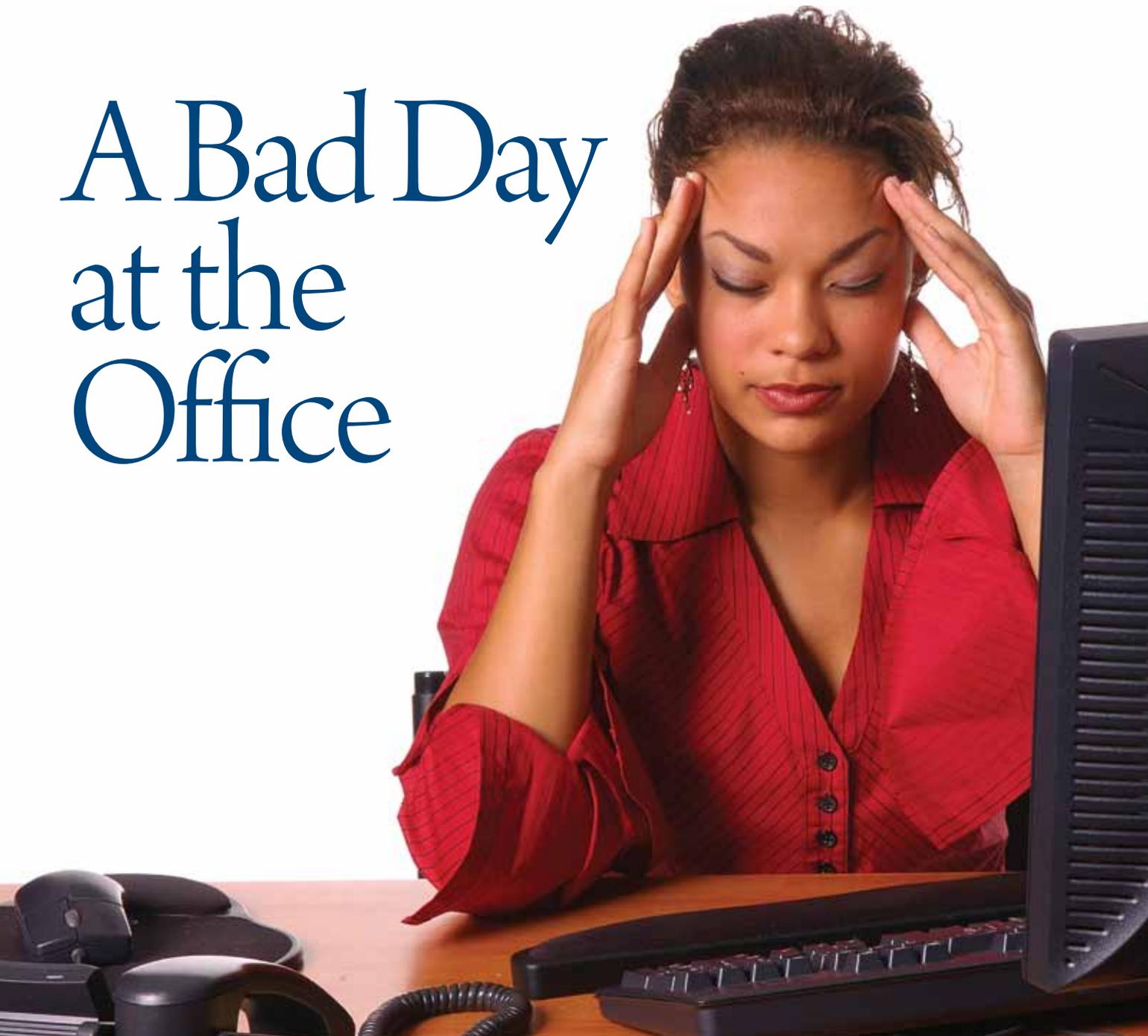


# A Bad Day at the Office



Dealing with incivility  
in the workplace

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Let's just say he wasn't a boss from heaven. Although my office was two doors down from his, he would frequently yell for me when he had something to say. Then there was the day he wanted to make a particularly strong point, and he shoved me against the wall, putting his face within inches of mine before starting in on a tirade. Needless to say, I didn't stay long at that job.

While that is clearly an extreme example, researchers say that less egregious forms of workplace incivility can cause untold pain to those directly affected and can cost businesses billions of dollars in lost productivity and reduced performance.

A coworker takes credit for something you've done, withholds information you need, calls you names, has a temper tantrum. A supervisor puts you down in front of other colleagues, shuts you out, sends snippy voice messages or emails. All this and more qualifies as workplace incivility.

And as our fears and anxieties grow, our own behavior may deteriorate. Stress levels are especially high in these days of job loss, heavier workloads, and market downturn. We all have things outside the workplace—relationship issues, health problems, and money woes—that we bring along with us to work. When we are under stress, our behavior can easily revert to the lowest common denominator of learned behaviors. We can be irritable, snap at people, take things personally, complain, and generally exhibit negative behavior.

Christine Pearson and Christine Porath, authors of *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do about It*, have studied these behaviors for over a decade, researching more than 9,000 people. They define incivility as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct.”

Incivility, say Pearson and Porath, is “in the eyes of the beholder.” While it can involve the bullying behavior of my experience, workplace incivility can also include such acts as interrupting a conversation, talking loudly in common areas, failing to return a phone call, checking email or texting during meetings, showing little interest in another individual's opinion, or even leaving malfunctioning office equipment for the next user to fix.

Among other findings, Pearson and Porath's studies showed that:

- Nearly half of respondents were the target of incivility from a coworker at least once a week. That 2005 number had increased from about one-fourth of workers in their 1998 study.
- 95 percent reported experiences of incivility from coworkers.
- 12 percent said they have left jobs because they were treated badly.
- Fortune 1000 executives spend roughly seven weeks a year resolving employee conflicts.
- 80 percent of employees believed they get no respect at work.

These two management researchers and busi-

ness school professors say that job stress “costs U.S. corporations \$300 billion a year, much of which has been shown to stem from workplace incivility. But incivility's true impact stretches far beyond that which is measurable in dollar terms....incivility unleashes a set of complicated and destructive dynamics on individuals, teams, and organizations that impede performance and create organizational dysfunction on a number of levels, leading to diminished financial results.”

And workplace incivility is not only a problem reserved for large corporations. It occurs across the spectrum, including in religious institutions.

One beleaguered employee in a religious environment told me recently that her supervisors “have no recognition about what is best for the ministry” and that they worry more about what “would upset the organizational chart.” She reported rudeness, being treated like a child, and one person higher on the food chain saying, “In my role, I can tell you what to do, and you *will* do it.” The employee told me that she wishes her workplace would pattern itself after the prophetic leaders in the Bible and go out on a limb for a value system that's congruent with the gospel.

Not much imagination is required to think of the outcomes of incivility. Badly treated employees suffer more stress, lose energy and disengage, take more sick days or actually become ill with the stress. They also tell their coworkers about the bad behavior—causing anxiety and fear in colleagues who also may have to pick up the slack that results from lower morale and absenteeism. In one study Pearson conducted, 46 percent of respondents contemplated changing jobs to avoid the instigator and 37 percent reduced their commitment to the organization.

So what can we do in our own workplaces to address this problem?

First of all, we do need to distinguish between hard-core abuse and bullying and more common (but still serious) lesser forms of incivility. Abuse is not to be tolerated. Clearly I could not stay

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in a position where my boss considered it acceptable to push me around physically.

Determine whether this is a matter for management or the human resources department, or whether it's something you can handle yourself. If the behavior is inconsiderate and rude rather than abusive, consider these ideas:

**Do not assume that you are only one person and, therefore, helpless.** A quick read of the book of Esther will remind you what one person is able to do.

**Examine your own behavior.** The only person we *can* change is ourself—and that's challenging enough.

**Affirm and compliment others.** Focus on colleagues' strengths rather than on what you don't like. You can help improve the tone in your office.

Remember that you're all on the same team. And remember how helpful it is to be on the receiving end of encouraging words.

**Learn to not react to the bad behavior of others.** As one friend of mine says, consider your "responsibility"—your ability to *respond*. Remember that you have choices in your own attitude and behavior. When someone is rude to you, take a deep breath, and wait a minute before you respond. Pause before you send an impulsive response to a disrespectful email. Sometimes humor can neutralize a charged atmosphere. And sometimes walking away is the right thing to do. You can set your own high standards for integrity and respect of others—don't let someone else set them for you.

**Show respect.** That "R-word" about which Aretha Franklin sang is essential. That's where Jesus's instructions in Luke 6:31 come in: "Do to

others as you would have them do to you."

**Remember that we are all created by God.** Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

That doesn't just mean *some* of God's creation—it means all of us. Sometimes it is difficult to remember that the rude and arrogant person who just got up in our face is a beloved child of God. But God calls us to love all creation.

**Seek reconciliation.** Try communication. Many of us are averse to conflict, but some things can be solved by honest conversation. Use "I" language and avoid blaming.

**Exhibit humility.** I know it's countercultural, but Philippians 2:4 says, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

What might that mean in the workplace? Perhaps we need to reconsider the idea that success means clawing our way to the top, stepping on others to get there.

**Practice grace.** What part does grace play in our office interactions? One day in my role as a magazine managing editor, I walked into the office of my colleague, the editor. He could see immediately that I was really stressed. Before I could get down to business, he invited me to sit in a soft chair in his office, take some deep breaths, and tell him what was going on with me. There was such grace in that invitation—it made all the difference when we finally attended to the business at hand. That happened perhaps eight or nine years ago but I still vividly remember that act of grace.

One insurance company has a series of TV ads that show random acts of kindness being passed along throughout a day. As one person receives kindness, he or she shows

it to someone else, who then passes it on. Think about the difference in your day when someone demonstrates kindness toward you. Does it open up your heart space and make you feel more generous and forgiving? Pass it on. Or be the one to initiate it!

**Take your own emotional temperature.** Are you high on fear and anxiety and low on serenity and love? It is extremely difficult to respond with a gracious heart when your own well is dry. Tend to your spiritual life and its disciplines. You know what fills your cup. Be sure your life contains such nourishment.

You may have heard the Native American story about the grandfather explaining to his grandson that he has a fight going on inside him. "It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil—anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment. The other is good—joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, and faith." After thinking about it, the grandson asks which wolf would win the battle. "The one I feed," replies the grandfather.

**Pray for colleagues who get under your skin.** When I am faithful to the practice of praying for my colleagues, it makes a difference in how I see and respond to them. It's more difficult to stay angry at someone for whom I am praying.

**Let go.** Most inconsiderate remarks or actions are not worth hanging on to. Doing so only keeps us engaged in an unhealthy dance. If the behavior is ongoing, try to find healthy ways to handle it. Carrying a grudge around burdens us with extra baggage we don't need.

**Focus on love.** We cannot resolve workplace conflicts alone, but with God's help we can always be more of who we were created to be.

These habits may or may not change your workplace, but they can transform you by changing your attitude and your behavior. ■

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