Managing incivility in the public sector

Drawing on recent studies, Dr Ao (Ollie) Zhou from Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato – University of Waikato, Dr Alina Haider from Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, and Dr Daniel Duan from Te Kunenga Ki Pūrehuroa – Massey University explore what managers and employees can do about incivility in the workplace.







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Workplace incivility – everyday rudeness, dismissiveness, or disrespect – may seem minor, but its effects are far from trivial. Defined as **"low-intensity behaviour with an ambiguous intent to harm"**, incivility can damage wellbeing and productivity for both individuals and teams. How is incivility tackled in the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector?

Unlike overt bullying or harassment, incivility is subjective, subtle, and often plausibly deniable – a dismissive tone in a meeting or being excluded from a conversation. These behaviours sit below the threshold of most formal complaint processes, and those on the receiving end are often unsure whether what they experienced was intentional and worth flagging.

The public sector context can create **fertile ground for incivility**. Public servants work under a distinctive mix of pressures: high public scrutiny, remuneration that often lags behind comparable private sector roles, and **frequent restructuring driven by shifting political priorities**. While New Zealand's public sector has comparatively strong structures to promote respect and inclusion, including the Code of Conduct (Public Service Commission, 2026), these formal mechanisms are largely designed for clear-cut misconduct, such as bullying and harassment, rather than the grey area that incivility occupies.

Raising concerns about incivility can feel like overreacting or unnecessarily disrupting group harmony, particularly when the behaviour in question is tied to the stress of an organisational restructure or shifting team dynamics. That gap between what formal processes can address and what people actually experience day to day is where managers and employees need practical strategies.

What can managers do?

Drawing on interviews and focus groups across 13 New Zealand public sector organisations, we found that managers are central to how public organisations prevent and address workplace incivility.

Effective managers intervene early, especially during periods of significant organisational change or when stress and uncertainty can amplify tensions. Rather than waiting for behaviours to escalate into formal complaints, they recognise and respond to rudeness when it first appears. This might mean a private conversation with the person concerned, or raising the issue in a team discussion before patterns become entrenched. Early intervention sends a clear signal that disrespectful behaviour is noticed and will not be overlooked.

Effective managers also model the behaviour they expect. They are consistently inclusive and courteous in their own interactions, which helps to establish team norms that others follow. When managers themselves are dismissive or inconsistent – friendly one day, curt the next – it creates confusion and erodes trust.

Managers also play a critical role in creating psychologically safe team environments, where members feel comfortable raising concerns. This means not only having open-door policies, but actively inviting feedback, responding constructively when issues are raised, and following through with action. Our study suggests that when employees see their managers take concerns seriously, they are



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more likely to speak up and less likely to disengage.

Practically, it also means recognising that incivility often thrives in ambiguity: unclear roles, inconsistent standards, and unspoken frustrations all create fertile ground for rude behaviour. The most effective managers address these underlying conditions rather than simply reacting to incidents after the fact.

What can employees do?

Individual workers can also take steps to protect themselves from incivility at work. Our ongoing **exploratory research** suggests that people who speak up constructively in difficult interpersonal situations have a better chance of diffusing tension and preserving their agency. Speaking up can be a hard choice, and speaking up well is a skill that requires practice.

Incivility often triggers strong emotions, and people typically either avoid confrontation or react emotionally. Yet neither response works well over time. Avoidance signals that rudeness is tolerated, while emotional reactions can harm professional standing and give the other party reason to justify further undermining. Speaking up constructively is a middle path that sets clearer boundaries without escalation.

What does this look like in practice? It involves a firm response that is calmly delivered in the moment and focused on solving the work issues at hand. This redirects attention to the task while signalling professionalism and personal agency. Because the response is measured, it is harder for others to dismiss or argue against it. Over time, this behaviour can have a compounding effect by signalling that rude conduct is neither helpful nor welcome.

Speaking up constructively takes self-regulation and preparation. Rudeness may reflect pressures occurring elsewhere in a person's life or be a passive-aggressive response to unresolved issues. Being aware of its possible roots can help people stay grounded, and mentally anticipating difficult interactions can make it easier to stay measured. Importantly, managers have a responsibility to create environments where people feel comfortable speaking up, linking individual action back to the team conditions that make it possible.

Looking ahead

Tackling workplace incivility is a team effort that requires action from both managers and employees. Managers who intervene early, model civil behaviour, and build psychologically safe environments help create the conditions for healthier teams. Employees who learn to speak up constructively can reinforce those conditions in everyday interactions.

Our ongoing research continues to explore what works in practice, and we welcome conversations with public sector leaders, managers, and team members who are grappling with these challenges. If you would like to discuss this research or explore opportunities for collaboration, please get in touch at **o.zhou@waikato.ac.nz**.

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