

## **CIVILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP**

**By John Phillip Rahoy**

Civility is taboo in today's society. So too is humility. These two traits have become synonymous with weakness, cowardice and frailty. To the contrary, these traits are the keys to great leadership and respect from your colleagues.

Years ago, I had a diverse lawyer who feared she was unworthy of being a lawyer, would cry alone thinking she was not enough and lost sleep feeling inadequate. I was fully unaware that she was drowning in emotions of self-doubt. She and I would talk in the evenings about life. I would tell her all of the problems I had, my failings in law school, the struggles I encountered in grasping what it took to be a "lawyer" etc. She would listen but not discuss her own struggles. Unbeknownst to me, in those discussions, she was learning to trust me and feel secure in knowing she would not be judged. One afternoon, she came into my office, closed the door and cried on my shoulder telling me things that she had told no one else. Things that had nothing to do with the law. Deep and troubling life experiences that she kept to herself. But in that moment, she felt safe enough to expose herself because I had shown her all of my flaws and imperfections. To this day she tells me that the humility I showed allowed her to trust me and eventually others. We are friends to this day and she is about to become my partner.

It is difficult for us for those of us who push ourselves daily to be the best we can be to remain humble. Humility it has been said, is one of the six pillars of civility.

Humility has been defined as “the feeling or attitude that you have no special importance that makes you better than others.” Cambridge Dictionary

It does not mean you do not care deeply about your workplace, business, success etc. But it does mean that you do not place yourself above others in the workplace.

An attorney once told me that there must always be a demarcation between you (the boss) and those working under you. I never said anything to that attorney but I vehemently disagree. Drawing lines between you and those working for you only creates distrust. Only when your colleagues know that you have flaws can they begin to allow themselves to take the criticism and guidance needed to become the best they can be.

A 2018 article written by Dan McCarthy stated what it takes to be a great leader. *“Great leaders have a presence. They pay attention, listen, ask great questions, and make everyone feel they are being heard and valued. They can be trusted, and they trust others. They are accountable for their actions, admit their mistakes and never point fingers or make excuses. . . They don’t let confidence turn into hubris. . . They empower others, are comfortable delegating, and they don’t hoard or abuse their power.”*

But it goes deeper than the quote. Allowing colleagues to see and hear your weaknesses grants them the freedom to see you not as a boss, someone to be feared but rather a human. Why is this so important? Because you are suddenly seen as someone who they can relate to, trust, rely on in the trenches and never fear retribution from.

A humble leader is approachable. The attorney feels safe in discussing their life struggles. In turn, they realize that when you provide criticism it comes from a place of civility, compassion and most importantly an understanding of their issue. Telling someone I have been there, done that and I understand allows them to accept your instruction.

However, it is not just humility that makes a great leader. As noted above, there are six pillars of civility: awareness, compassion, gratitude, humility, responsibility and encouragement. Six Pillars of Civility, Jay Remer 2021. These traits are equally important to living a happy and satisfying life.

Awareness of what we do and how we act leads to strong relationships. I know an attorney who has gone through associates and legal assistant staff year after year. Not once does he look in the mirror to think maybe it is him. Instead, he always professes that those who left were awful employees. This attorney is completely lacking in self-awareness. As a result, the practice of law is all he has. He has never built any strong work or personal relationships.

Compassion is probably the greatest of gifts given to us. Compassion for ourselves is just as important as for others. We are imperfect creatures, us humans. By having compassion we help others simply by being present in the moment of crisis. In return, those that work with us return those feelings. Many of you know that I have a personal situation that I now accept will likely be a lifetime issue. There are days when it is clear that I am down and struggling. But our group has fostered such a close nit relationship that I can lean on the attorneys and legal staff for support. The reverse is

true. In short, we know all about each other's lives, hardships, etc. It has resulted in stability, trust, continuity and a caring work environment.

Encouragement is an absolute necessity of civility. Positive reinforcement allows the colleague to understand that when you criticize, it is coming from a place of honesty because you also encourage them to take risks and to reach their potential.

A good example of this came 3 years ago. I have an associate that was clearly showing himself to be ahead of the curve if you will. I brought him into my office to discuss his progress. Told him honestly that there will be firms that will offer more money but if you stay, I have a line of business down the road that I will earmark for you. I told him early on that I already saw a future for him. He has since rejected many offers from other firms paying much more. Why? He has told me and others that he knows I have his back, he trusts me, I am honest with him and that he considers me a friend as much as a "boss". To the contrary, when encouragement is lacking, there is a feeling of distrust, a questioning of motivations, and a feeling of negativity.

Responsibility is a pillar of civility that is missing desperately in today's society. We see everyday people not taking responsibility, making excuses, and shifting blame. When those working under you see you take the heat for a mistake with a client, accept blame for a mistake in office, cover for an associate who made an error, it does not go unnoticed. In response, others will strive to be better. I was in trial recently and made a mistake. Nothing significant but an error none the less. The attorney trying the case was making a technical legal argument to argue our position. It was clear that the Judge was getting frustrated. I stood up and told the judge, I made the error and whatever ruling you need to make do so. We are not going to try and win on a technicality. First,

the judge smiled and appreciated my statement. The result, a favorable ruling despite my error. Second, another associate watching the events unfold came to me later and stated “you always accept responsibility regardless of the outcome.” Again, these things are noticed and cataloged by those working with you.

Gratitude is really self explanatory. Being thankful for what you have and who helped you to get is key to great leadership. Our group often goes to lunch, holiday dinners, we even did an escape room event and dinner after. I never miss the opportunity to tell them how grateful I am to have them in my life, to be able to rely on them in difficult times. These words ring hollow if you do not apply the above character traits. However, if you do, you will be blessed with a loyal and caring group. My legal assistant who is the kindest, sweetest woman has told me on more than one occasion she has never been so happy working anywhere in any group. She is in her 60s. I am grateful she feels this way but also disheartened that it took so long to get there.

Being civil is not something you can fake nor apply on an ad hoc basis. If you have it, it not only makes you a great leader, but it keeps you grounded as a person and ultimately leads to a happy and fulfilling life.