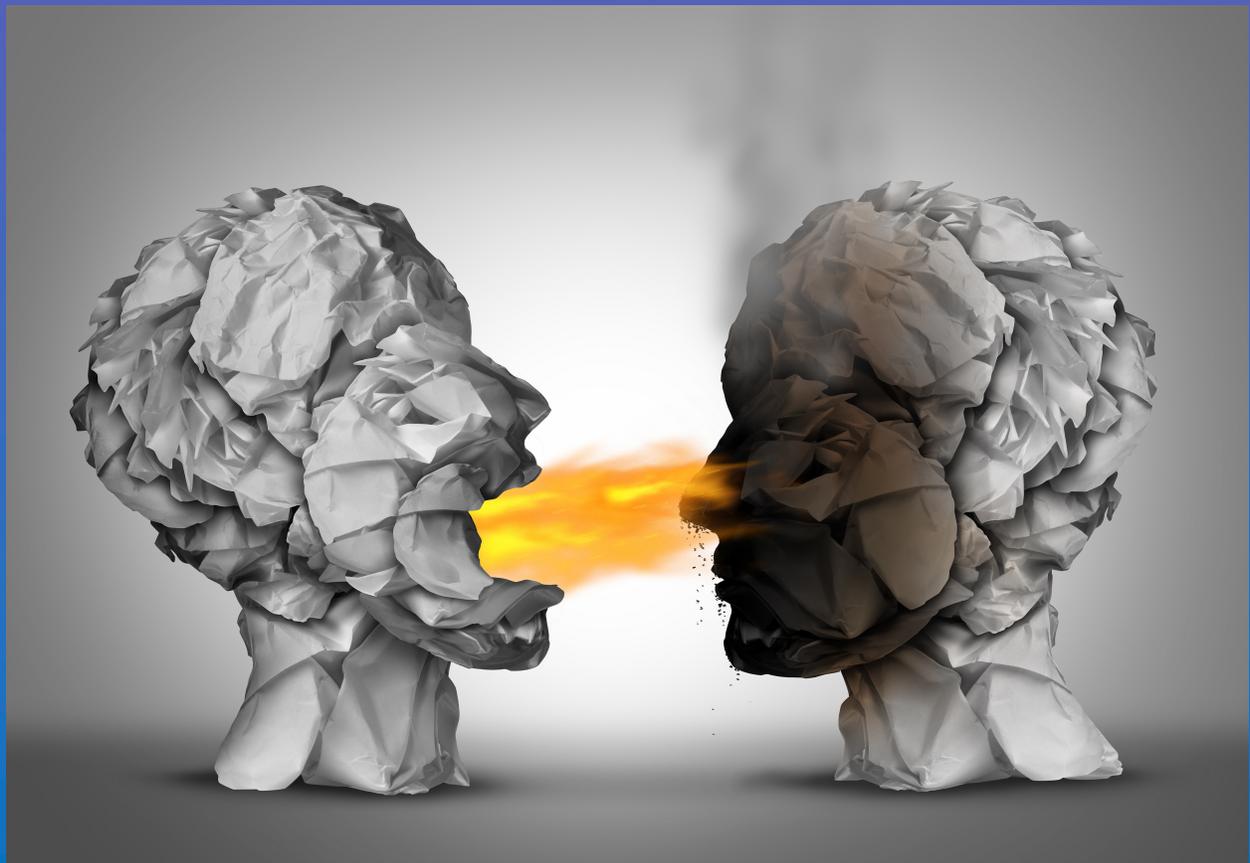


# PRSA

PRSA Civility Task Force White Paper

## MODELING CIVILITY:

How Public Relations Professionals Can Restore  
Quality, Integrity and Inclusiveness to Civil Discourse



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## Introduction

Civil discourse is in a state of crisis. Public dialogues today are celebrated not for what they accomplish but for whom they divide. Well-intentioned efforts at constructive debate are routinely derailed by one-sided diatribes aimed not at finding common ground but at perpetuating disagreement in the counterproductive hope that one side's demeaning invective will win and the other side will be denigrated and lose.

In short, we are living in an age of rage.

As a society, the biggest danger we face is not that we perpetually default to a zero-sum game in which one side or the other must unequivocally win on any given issue. The greater risk, rather, is the corrosion of civil dialogue to the point where all sides inexorably lose. This degradation of civil discourse doesn't just undermine our nation's fundamental civic values as a democracy. It permeates our interactions at work, at the dinner table, in our communities and online. It threatens the very thing that distinguishes us as a species: our ability to share our values and perspectives and thereby find ways to cooperate in vast numbers and increase our chances of collective success. It attacks the pillars of our economy, our health and safety, our national security and our civil rights. Most insidiously, children exposed to incivility at home emulate it and, ultimately, internalize it. While political animus is unquestionably a contributing factor, it is society that ultimately bears responsibility for weakened norms of discourse. And it is at society that any corrective response must be aimed.

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The public relations profession has not only a professional obligation to respond to this growing crisis of incivility, but a moral one as well. Based on strategies of mutual engagement and adaptation, the public relations sector has the reach and expertise to deliver guidance and positive examples at scale to help institutions and organizations of all types function more effectively and realize their goals.

As a national organization of professional communicators, business leaders and educators, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is uniquely positioned to convene a broader public dialogue about the corrosion of public discourse and deliver programming that drives meaningful, lasting change. Indeed, we see embracing civility as both a strategic opportunity and a professional responsibility called for by PRSA's Code of Ethics, which professes values that directly support making the improvement of civil discourse a priority. These central tenets include *expertise*, through which "we build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences," and *fairness*, by which members pledge to deal fairly with all parties and "respect all opinions and support the right of free expression."

The magnitude of the incivility problem and the negative toll it takes on every aspect of our daily lives literally beg for the intervention of professional communicators.

## A Decade of Decline

Although the corrosion of civility has been amplified in recent years, declining norms of civil engagement have been a growing problem for at least the last decade. In their latest joint survey on the subject, Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate and KRC Research found that 93 percent of those polled believed incivility was a problem in 2019, with 63 percent describing it as a “major problem.” Those numbers have remained relatively unchanged since the agencies first conducted their survey in 2010. On top of that, 74 percent of the respondents felt incivility was worse than a few years prior—a figure that’s also largely stayed the same since 2010—and 54 percent said they believed the level of incivility in society will only get worse in the future. Those surveyed also reported an average of 10.2 uncivil encounters per week.

One area that’s seen a significant reported increase in incivility over the past decade is social media. In their first survey back in 2010, Weber Shandwick et al. found that social media wasn’t much of a problem to most people, with blogs being the bigger reported internet threat. But in 2019, 63 percent of those polled said they believed social media causes more harm than good.

**Experiencing or even witnessing incivility can lead to stress, feelings of fear and anger, reduced capacity to absorb information, impaired short-term memory and cognition, lack of creativity, reduced job satisfaction and work quality, aimlessness and a willingness to quit. It can even cause a weakened immune system and damage one’s relationships with family.**

The number of reported uncivil online interactions has also increased in recent years, going from 4.4 per week in 2013 to 5.5 in 2019. Additionally, of those who believed incivility will grow worse over the next few years, 57 percent said the internet/social media will be to blame. Only 24 percent felt that way in 2012, the first year the survey offered the internet/social media as a possible reason.

Of course, the Weber Shandwick poll was not the only survey to see a decline in civility. A 2017 iCitizen poll found that 90 percent of respondents felt incivility was a problem in America, while a 2016 survey from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago showed that 74 percent of Americans felt manners and behavior have deteriorated through the decades. Then there’s the

American Psychological Association’s 2017 Stress in America survey, which found that 60 percent of those polled felt increased stress due to social divisiveness. This stress could lead to an increase in negative civil discourse, according to the APA.

## Root Causes of Incivility

In addition to the stress brought on by social divisiveness, the rise of incivility can be attributed to a number of other factors. The internet plays a substantial role since everyone now has a platform for airing their grievances and attacking others—often anonymously and without fear of retaliation. Many people also exclusively read what they agree with, which reinforces their belief they are correct and that everyone who thinks differently is wrong.

Problems at work also encourage incivility. According to a 2016 study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, even subtle episodes of workplace incivility cause increased mental fatigue as employees struggle to decide whether they have been abused. This fatigue can lead workers to

lose self-control and perpetuate the very same uncivil behaviors they themselves have experienced.

Dr. Steven Mintz, professor emeritus at California Polytechnic State University, additionally pointed out that manners often aren't taught in schools or at home, so children are not getting the foundations they need to become civil adults. Likewise, Mintz said film and television characters as well as social media personalities frequently engage in uncivil behavior that is glorified by the public, who then emulate and perpetuate it.

And while incivility crisis is not solely a political problem, the political sector undoubtedly has played a major role in its rise. A 2017 NPR/PBS NewsHour poll found seven in 10 Americans believed the civility level in Washington has decreased since President Donald Trump was elected, and Weber Shandwick's 2018 survey discovered 83 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of Republicans felt uncivil behavior by politicians led to incivility by members of the public. They may be right. According to a 2016 Allegheny College/Zogby poll, only 33 percent of respondents said they tried to persuade someone to agree with their views on a political issue. That's a significant decrease from 2010, when 52 percent of those surveyed said they attempted to bridge a political divide.

### **Economic Impacts of Incivility**

According to a 2016 study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, workplace incivility costs companies \$14,000 per employee in lost productivity and work time. Additionally, *Risk & Insurance* magazine reported in 2017 that episodes of workplace violence as a result of incivility cost U.S. employers \$4.2 billion each year.

Incivility also has a detrimental impact on consumer behavior. Three out of four respondents to Weber Shandwick's 2010 survey believed companies that demonstrate uncivil behavior should be boycotted. Those who use social media a lot—and therefore could have a disproportionate influence on their followers—were even more adamant about disassociating themselves from uncivil organizations, with 83 percent saying they'd discontinue doing business with them. Of these social media influencers, 64 percent said they've told their followers not to buy products from a company that's been uncivil, 63 percent said they've stopped watching and listening to uncivil TV and radio shows and 56 percent said they've ceased buying from an organization they believed perpetuated incivility.

### **Risks to Health and Safety**

Christine Porath, one of the leading researchers in the field of workplace incivility, wrote that experiencing or even witnessing incivility can lead to stress, feelings of fear and anger, reduced capacity to absorb information, impaired short-term memory and cognition, lack of creativity, reduced job satisfaction and work quality, aimlessness and a willingness to quit. It can even cause a weakened immune system and damage one's relationships with family.

Regarding safety, incivility can lead to violence as people who feel mistreated sometimes lash out. In fact, *Risk & Insurance* magazine reported that workplace violence ends 1,000 lives annually.

This all stands in stark contrast to the many positive effects of civil behavior. According to Porath, maintaining a respectful tone and treating others benevolently results in heightened positive emotions, increased self-value, improved work quality, added energy and enthusiasm, enhanced relationships and trust, a safer workplace and greater job satisfaction.

### Societal Effects of Incivility

As if the ill effects on the economy, health and safety aren't enough, incivility also has a significant negative impact on society writ large. Specifically, 73 percent of people surveyed for the 2019 Weber Shandwick poll said they believe incivility leads to political gridlock, which makes it impossible for needed laws to get passed. Additionally, 71 percent believed incivility leads to political disengagement, while 61 percent said it deters people from entering public service. Overall, 89 percent felt civility is crucial for democracy.

The vast majority of those polled believed incivility brings about a host of other societal problems outside politics, as well. These issues included cyberbullying (89 percent), harassment (88 percent), violent behavior (88 percent) and hate crimes (88 percent).

**Children exposed to incivility at home emulate it and, ultimately, internalize it. While political animus is unquestionably a contributing factor, it is society that ultimately bears responsibility for weakened norms of discourse. And it is at society that any corrective response must be aimed.**

### Reversing the Corrosion of Civility

Despite incivility's prevalence and its numerous negative consequences, people haven't given up hope. The 2019 Weber Shandwick survey found that 60 percent of respondents were hopeful civility will improve, with 86 percent saying they thought it's possible to disagree in a civil manner. But what can be done to end incivility? Porath has said people must learn to empathize with others, treat peers with kindness, follow appropriate situational behaviors and build self-happiness to the point where negative actions by others

won't trigger them. At the same time, leaders must model good behavior, teach their subordinates how to act properly, hire workers who value civil behavior to begin with and reward good examples while punishing bad actions.

Many Americans seem willing to be civil, too. According to the 2019 Weber Shandwick survey, 46 percent of respondents said they'd be willing to behave in a civil manner when treated uncivilly, 45 percent said they'd be willing to encourage loved ones and colleagues to be civil and 43 percent said they'd be willing to vote for political leaders who behave civilly. When asked about social media, 38 percent said they'd be willing to use their platforms to improve civility by posting positive things (23 percent), flagging uncivil information (20 percent) and sharing messages about people who act uncivilly (13 percent).

## Work to Date

A panel discussion on the corrosion of civility at the PRSA International Conference in Austin, Texas in October 2018 was well attended and prompted a great deal of interest from members. Following the presentation, a small group committed to taking the discussion forward, including past PRSA National Chair Anthony D'Angelo, APR, Fellow, PRSA; longtime PRSA member and Counselors Academy Chair-elect Jon Goldberg; and Gary Saffitz, a communications and social marketing consultant with particular expertise in social change. Over the course of 2019, this informal working group engaged with then PRSA Chair-elect Garland Stansell, chair of the Strategic Planning Committee, culminating in the adoption of civility as one of the 8 strategic pillars of the society's 2020 plan.

## PRSA's Role and Opportunities for Members

As the largest organization of communications professionals in the United States, PRSA is comprised of practitioners of all levels and interests across countless industries and organizational settings. Within the society, a broad array of national committees, chapters and professional interest sections bring their own diverse perspectives to critical subjects like professional ethics and standards, diversity and inclusion, professional development and industry advocacy and have voiced interest in making the advancement of civil discourse part of their work. There are numerous opportunities as well to guide the future of the public relations profession by engaging students and educators at more than 375 colleges and universities in civility-related programming under the auspices of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA).

**As a national organization of professional communicators, business leaders and educators, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is uniquely positioned to convene a broader public dialogue about the corrosion of public discourse and deliver programming that drives meaningful, lasting change.**

Embracing civility as a platform is not about promoting politeness or stifling disagreement, nor is it focused on discourse within PRSA or the public relations sector. The primary objective, rather, is:

***To further understanding of the role of public relations in civil society by positioning PRSA and public relations professionals to lead a larger national conversation about the need to reverse the corrosion of civility in American life and bring our collective expertise, insight and influence to bear on fostering more effective and inclusive civil discourse in all corners of society.***

Among the key strategies for accomplishing this will be to:

- Establish PRSA as a source of research, tools, resources and training that empowers individuals and institutions to advance the discussion of civility and take an active role in improving the quality of discourse in their own organizations, industries and circles of influence.

- Enlist interested communications professionals to model and promote strategies for achieving more effective civil discourse in their daily work and lives as part of a national “civility corps” movement that grows organically within and beyond the PR industry.
- Equip PRSA committees, chapters and sections with the tools and resources they need to engage their members and the communities and industries they serve by incorporating civility-related programming into their own plans and activities.

Specific opportunities for member involvement include, but are by no means limited to:

- National Advocacy and Public Education
  - Encouraging member involvement by establishing civility forum on MyPRSA to share updates and solicit ideas and input.
  - Activating existing PRSA mechanisms, e.g., PRsay, Strategies & Tactics and online communities, to identify, recruit and support members who are interested in pursuing civility-related efforts within their spheres of influence.
  - Conducting sponsored research.
    - Members
    - Business/industry
    - Academia
    - Society at-large
  - Delivering focused thought leadership.
    - Speakers bureau.
    - Op-eds.
    - Published research findings.
    - Articles and intellectual capital.
  - Engaging national, local and industry media.
    - Earned media outreach.
    - Public service announcement campaign.
  - Creating a National Civility Week/Month.
  - Recruiting members to seed a national “civility corps” dedicated to public education and modeling effective civil discourse and civic behavior.
  - Establishing an award/medal to recognize organizations, programs and people who are making a difference in improving civility and modeling effective civil discourse.
  - Creating a new Silver Anvil category for campaigns and programs that advance civility and effective civic engagement.
  - Distributing a non-partisan civility toolkit for local civic leaders and bodies, e.g., town councils, boards of education, planning boards, etc., possibly in partnership with chambers of commerce or service organizations.
- Professional Development
  - Surveying members to identify core concerns, beliefs and ideas to develop baseline for where members stand and what they are willing to do to engage in civility modeling.

- Delivering ongoing PD programming.
  - ICON and district conference sessions.
  - Section conference programming.
  - Regular PD webinars.
  - On-demand webinars and education modules.
  - Certificate programs in civil discourse and engagement, negotiation and conflict resolution, etc.
- PRSSA
  - Focusing the 2021 Bateman Competition on student campaigns to promote civility.
  - Crafting a university curriculum module and teaching materials.
  - Delivering a series of guest lectures and on-campus community symposia.
  - Establishing a standard of professional responsibility and civil discourse “pledge” for graduating professionals.
- PRSA Chapters
  - Developing a campaign-in-a-box to drive local media and community outreach around the efforts local PR professionals in reversing the decline of civility and modeling civil behavior.
  - Creating a library of on-demand PD modules and materials for chapter use.
- Professional Interest Sections
  - Conducting webinars and other professional development programs tailored to the interests and professional priorities of section members.
  - Developing tailored programming for section conferences.
- Counselors Academy
  - Launching targeted, grassroots “demonstration projects” that enlist CAPRSA member agencies around the country to test alternative strategies for fostering civility and reversing the growing normalization of incivility and uncivil discourse and behaviors.
  - Developing a CAPRSA campaign-in-a-box with promotional “badge” for display by participating member agencies.
  - Creating programming at CAPRSA Spring Conference.
- PRSA Committees
  - PRSA Foundation and Diversity and Inclusion Committee:
    - Considering the role of civility in Diversity and Inclusion as a means to welcoming diverse perspectives from those of varying backgrounds.
  - Advocacy Committee:
    - Identifying opportunities to align and cross-promote with misinformation initiatives
    - Working with Advocacy leaders to establish civility as a central plank of the proposed “voice4everyone” portal.
  - Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS):

- Publishing of an Ethical Standards Advisory on civility as an ethical consideration, based on PRSA’s Code of Ethics.
- College of Fellows:
  - Publishing guest columns in the College of Fellows newsletter and on the College’s social media channels.
  - Delivering professional development programming at Fellows forums, including its annual meeting and, potentially, through Fellows-only webinars.

For additional information about PRSA’s Civility Task Force and ways to become involved as a communications professional in reversing the tide of incivility, contact Jon Goldberg, civility task force co-chair, at [jon@reputationarchitects.com](mailto:jon@reputationarchitects.com), or Tony D’Angelo, APR, Fellow PRSA, at [dangelo@sy.edu](mailto:dangelo@sy.edu).

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