

CIVILITY AT WORK:

# How Inner Work, Everyday Moments, and Culture Shape Workplaces



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# The Reality HR Leaders Are Navigating Right Now

## Capacity Is Thin

Leaders and teams are carrying the emotional weight of ongoing uncertainty, change, and outside stressors into the workplace.



## Tension Is Surfacing

Broader societal strain is showing up at work as heightened sensitivity, quicker reactions, and less tolerance for disagreement.



## Expectations Are Rising

HR is being asked to hold space for employees' real-world concerns while maintaining focus and performance at work.



# 62%

## Nearly Two-thirds

of U.S. employees say **their manager or supervisor has ignored acts of incivility in the workplace.**

# How Organizations Are Thinking About Civility Right Now

## Responding to Incivility

### *REACTIVE*

- Triggered by a specific incident
- Focused on correcting behavior after harm occurs

#### **Example:**

HR steps in after a complaint or escalation.



## Preparing for Challenging Times

### *PROACTIVE*

- Focused on building skills before harm
- Recognizes that outside stress and uncertainty show up at work

#### **Example:**

Organizations invest in civility skills to help people navigate tension with care.

## What Workplaces Are Experiencing



## What We Are Working Towards

- Leaders and teams operating in constant reaction mode
- Everyday tension handled inconsistently or avoided
- Culture shaped by stress, urgency, and silence
- HR pulled into reactive mediation after harm occurs



- Leaders who can pause, regulate, and respond with intention
- Practical tools for navigating real moments of friction
- Culture shaped by trust, psychological safety, and repair
- HR equipped to strengthen civility proactively and systemically

# The Civility at Work Framework

#1

## The Inner Work

Build self-awareness, regulate emotions, and address core wounds to confidently navigate workplace conflicts.

#2

## The Everyday Work

Apply practical tools and communication techniques to foster respect and productivity in daily interactions.

#3

## The Cultural Work

Understand how leadership, systems, and workplace norms influence and sustain a culture of civility.

# What Happens When One Layer Is Missing

## MISSING INNER WORK

### BUT HAVE... Strong Culture Work

Leaders know the values, but under pressure they interrupt, escalate, or shut down.

## MISSING EVERYDAY WORK

### BUT HAVE... Strong Inner Work

Leaders have good intentions but lack tools for real-time conflict.

## MISSING CULTURAL WORK

### BUT HAVE... Strong Everyday Work

Individuals try, but systems quietly undermine civility.



Values collapse under pressure without **inner** regulation.



Good intentions stall without practical, **everyday** skills.



Effort fades when **culture** or systems do not support it.

# How This Framework Reinforces Each Leg of Civility

## The Inner Work

builds emotional regulation and leadership presence

**SO THAT...**



**Leaders can pause, stay grounded, and respond skillfully under pressure**

## The Everyday Work

teaches tools for meetings, feedback, and conflict

**SO THAT...**



**Teams can navigate tension without escalation, argument, debate, or damage**

## The Cultural Work

focuses on psychological safety and systems alignment

**SO THAT...**



**Civility is reinforced by culture, not dependent on individual effort**

# The Inner Work of Civility

Why it matters before anything else...

## What we mean by “Inner Work”

The inner work is the ability to notice what is happening inside us, especially under pressure, and choose how we show up rather than reacting automatically.



## At its core, Inner Work includes:

- Awareness of emotions and stress responses
- Understanding personal triggers and unmet needs
- The ability to pause, regulate, and respond intentionally

## Key idea

Civility is not just a communication skill. It is a capacity that begins internally.

# Stress Shapes Behavior Before We Realize It

Under stress, the nervous system prioritizes protection.

These responses happen automatically, even for thoughtful and values-driven people.

## Reactivity

Quick, defensive responses meant to regain control.

**Examples:** snapping in meetings, interrupting, escalating tension.

## Avoidance

Pulling back to reduce perceived risk, rejection, or discomfort.

**Examples:** delaying feedback, staying silent, avoiding hard conversations.

## Rigidity

Holding tightly to structure or authority to feel safe or secure.

**Examples:** micromanaging, resisting input, shutting down alternatives.

# When Unmet Needs Show Up at Work

When needs go unmet, reactions get louder.

Stress often activates deeper concerns around safety, belonging, respect, or control.

## Unmet Needs

Safety and predictability



Belonging and inclusion



Autonomy and control



## Common Workplace Reactions

Feedback feels personal  
instead of informational

Disagreement feels threatening  
rather than productive

People withdraw, defend, or over-assert

# The Leadership Connection

## CUES

**People take cues from those with power**

Leaders' emotional states shape psychological safety more than their words.



## PRESENCE

**Presence matters more than perfection**

Employees notice whether leaders can pause, repair, and re-ground.



## IMPACT

**Why inner work is leadership work**

- Regulation creates safety
- Awareness builds trust
- Repair restores dignity

# Reflection Question

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*If comfortable, post your answer in the chat.*

**What stress response do you notice most often in yourself  
or leaders you support?**

**(Reactivity, avoidance, rigidity, or something else?)**

# The Everyday Work of Civility

Where civility is practiced, or eroded, every day

## What we mean by “Everyday Work”

The everyday work is how civility shows up in routine interactions, not just high-stakes moments.



## Where Everyday Work lives:

- Meetings
- Feedback
- Communication
- Disagreement

## Key idea

Civility is built through repetition, not intention alone.

# Civility Lives in Everyday Moments

#1

## Meetings

Who gets airtime, how interruptions are handled, whether harm is addressed.

#2

## Feedback

How impact is named, timing is handled, and accountability is held.

#3

## Communication

Tone, clarity, and assumptions in email, chat, and conversation.

#4

## Disagreements

Whether tension becomes a learning moment or causes damage.

# How Teams Get Ahead of Incivility

## SHARED LANGUAGE

Using common phrases that slow things down and reduce defensiveness.

**Examples:** “Let’s pause,” “Can we reset?” “Help me understand your perspective.”

## CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Agreeing on how people will show up, especially when stress is present.

**Examples:** Norms around interruptions, feedback timing, and respectful challenge.

## SPACE FOR REPAIR

Creating regular time to acknowledge impact and reset before it escalates.

**Examples:** Naming a misstep in the moment, following up after a tense meeting.

# Proactive Everyday Behaviors That Strengthen Civility

## **Defensiveness → Curiosity**

Instead of protecting or pushing back, teams ask questions to understand before reacting.

## **Silence → Clear Communication**

Instead of letting tension build, concerns are named early and directly.

## **Avoidance → Respectful Challenge**

Instead of sidestepping disagreement, people challenge ideas while preserving dignity.

# Reflection Question

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*If comfortable, post your answer in the chat.*

**Which everyday moment is most challenging for civility  
right now?**

**(Meetings, feedback, communication, disagreement, or  
something else?)**

# The Cultural Work of Civility

Why individual effort is not enough

## What we mean by “Cultural Work”

Even skilled,  
well-intentioned people  
struggle to sustain civility in  
systems that do not support  
it.



## What Culture Work does:

Culture teaches people what is  
expected, what is rewarded, and  
what is safe.

## Key idea

Civility lasts when  
it is reinforced by  
systems, not  
dependent on  
individual heroics.

# Cultural Signals That Shape Civility

## WHAT IS REWARDED

Who is promoted, praised, or protected.

**Examples:** Speed over care, results without regard for impact.

## WHAT IS IGNORED

Behaviors that go unaddressed.

**Examples:** Interruptions, dismissive tone, avoidance of repair.

## WHAT LEADERS MODEL

How those with power behave under pressure.

**Examples:** Leaders pause, listen, and repair or push through tension.

# Why Individual Skill Breaks Down Without Cultural Support

## What individuals are asked to do

Regulate emotions



Communicate clearly



Navigate conflict respectfully



## What systems may signal instead

Move fast

Avoid discomfort

Prioritize output over process

# How Organizations Prepare for Civility

## Align policies with lived values

Ensure performance, promotion, and conduct policies reinforce respectful behavior.

## Support leaders under pressure

Provide tools, coaching, and permission to slow down when stakes are high.

## Make accountability clear and fair

Address harm consistently, regardless of role or status.

# Reflection Question

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*If comfortable, post your answer in the chat.*

**Which part of your culture feels hardest to navigate  
right now?**

**(Policies, leadership decisions, workload, communication,  
or something else?)**

# REMINDER: Civility Is Built Across Three Layers

## INNER

Preparing people to notice stress, regulate emotions, and choose how they show up.



## CULTURAL

Designing systems and norms that support civility even under pressure.

## EVERYDAY

Strengthening relationships through how teams communicate, disagree, and repair.

# This is Proactive Work

**#1**

## **Preparing people**

So stress and uncertainty do not turn into harm.

**#2**

## **Strengthening relationships**

So tension becomes learning instead of damage.

**#3**

## **Designing supportive systems**

So civility does not depend on individual heroics.

# Keep the Work Going with the Civility at Work Campaign

## The Civility at Work video series

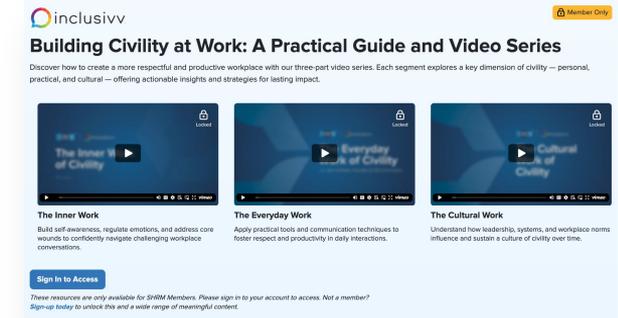
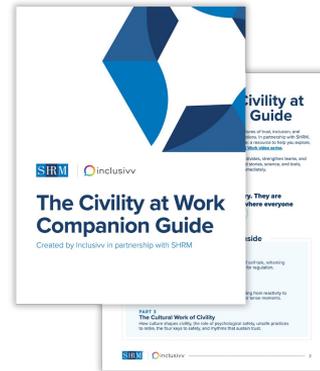
Designed to help individuals, teams, and organizations build the skills and systems needed for today's realities.

## How HR leaders can use it

- Leadership development
- Team learning and discussion
- Culture-building and prevention
- Support during periods of uncertainty

## Access

Free for SHRM members at [shrm.org/civility](https://shrm.org/civility)



# Leading Through Uncertainty Culture Conversation

## What this is

An online, facilitated Culture Conversation designed to help leaders and teams process uncertainty, external stress, and workplace tension with care.

## What to expect

- 60–90 minute live session
- Facilitated by an expert Inclusivv facilitator
- Designed for up to 12 participants

## What it supports

- Naming what people are carrying into work
- Building shared understanding and trust
- Practicing civility skills in real time



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# On-Demand Civility Course

## What this includes

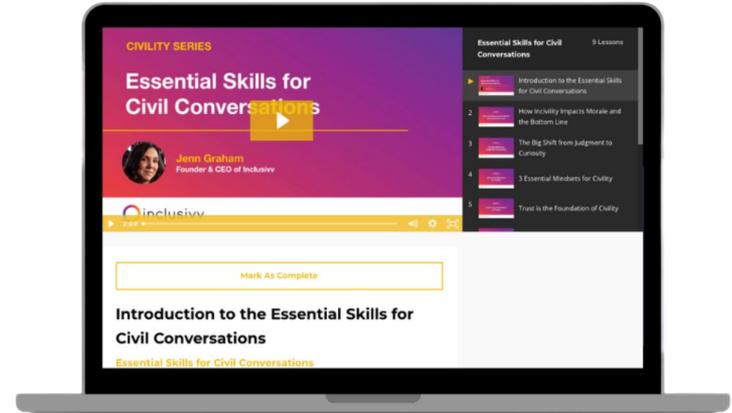
- Four-module, on-demand course
- Approximately four hours of content
- Certificate of completion

## Designed to support

- Individual reflection and growth
- Team learning and shared language
- Manager one-on-one conversations

## NEW: Learner's Guide Included

- Individual reflection
- Team discussion
- Manager one-on-one friendly



Get 30% off with code: **SHRM2026**

BE BRAVE  
*enough*  
TO START A  
CONVERSATION  
*that matters*



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**THANK YOU!**