

CIVILITY AT WORK

# The Inner Work of Civility

How to strengthen leadership, trust and resilience through the inner work of civility

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**It's OK to not be OK.**

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# The Inner Work of Civility



**The inner work of civility** begins when we become aware of what's happening *inside* of us and learn how to respond, rather than react.

# The Civility at Work Framework

#1

## The Inner Work

Notice stress, regulate emotions, and choose how you show up.

#2

## The Everyday Work

Communicate, disagree, give feedback, and repair in routine moments.

#3

## The Cultural Work

Design norms and systems that support civility under pressure.

# The Reality HR Leaders are Carrying

## Capacity is thin

Employees and managers are bringing change fatigue, outside stress, and depleted nervous systems into work.

## Expectations are rising

HR is asked to create belonging, performance, psychological safety, compliance, and calm, often at once.

## Tension is surfacing

Societal strain shows up as faster reactions, thinner patience, and lower tolerance for disagreement.

**The challenge is not simply more conflict. It is less capacity to metabolize conflict well.**

# Incivility is an Energy Tax

It drains attention, trust, productivity, and psychological safety.

**212M**

acts of incivility U.S. workers experience or witness per day

**\$2.3B**

lost per day for U.S. organizations through reduced productivity and absenteeism

**72.5M**

acts of workplace incivility per day in Q4 2025

**34.4 min**

average lost productivity per act of incivility for U.S. workers

Source: Q4 2025 Civility Index, SHRM, December 2025

**Most workplace conflicts are actually  
dysregulated nervous systems colliding.**

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# Civility Begins in the Nervous System

## Fight

Quick defensive responses to regain control.

Snapping, attacking, blaming, escalating

## Flight

Pulling back to reduce risk, rejection, or discomfort.

Delaying feedback, staying silent, disappearing

## Freeze

Holding tightly to structure or authority to feel safe.

Shutting down, people pleasing, inability to respond clearly

## Reflection

**Think about a recent interaction at work that felt emotionally charged.**

**What was I actually feeling?**

**What story did I attach to the interaction?**

**What felt threatened in me?**

**Unmet needs cause unwanted reactions.**

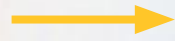
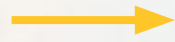
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## Unmet Needs

Safety and predictability

Belonging and respect

Autonomy and control



## Common Workplace Reactions

Feedback feels personal instead of informational

Disagreement feels like rejection or exclusion

People withdraw, defend, or over-assert

**Many workplace behaviors are  
protective patterns, not bad intentions.**

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# Core Wounds as Protective Patterns

## I am not safe

control, withdrawal,  
hyper-vigilance

## I am not valued

overfunctioning,  
approval-seeking

## I am powerless

withholding voice,  
indecision

## I cannot trust

micromanaging,  
poor delegation

## I need to be perfect

overwork, intolerance  
of mistakes

**Civility is not the suppression of emotion.  
It is the regulation of emotion.**

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# The Four-Step Reset

Use this in heated conversations, tense meetings, or right before you hit send.

1

**Notice**

What is happening in my body right now?

2

**Name**

What story am I making up about this?

3

**Need**

What need is trying to be protected?

4

**Next move**

What civil action would build trust now?

**The reset does not avoid the hard conversation. It makes the hard conversation possible.**

# What inner capacities actually make civility possible?

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# The Five Capabilities that Make Civility Possible

A set of leadership capacities we can strengthen over time.

1

**Self-  
Awareness**

notice

2

**Emotional  
regulation**

choose

3

**Empathy**

connect

4

**Accountability**

repair

5

**Courage**

lead

# 1. Self-Awareness

Notice what is happening inside you before it spills onto others.

## Self-aware Leaders Recognize:

- their triggers
- assumptions
- blind spots
- emotional patterns

## A Self-aware Leader Asks:

- What just activated me?
- What story am I making up?
- What assumption might be incomplete?

## Micro-practice:

- Notice your body.
- Notice your story.
- Notice your next impulse.

**Awareness creates choice.**

## 2. Emotional Regulation

Civility is not the suppression of emotion. It's the regulation of emotion.

### Regulated Leaders:

- pause before reacting
- stay connected under pressure
- create emotional safety for others

### Before Responding:

- Pause one breath
- Relax your jaw and shoulders
- Ask: "What would be useful right now?"
- Choose curiosity over judgment

### Remember:

Stress signals threat  
Calm signals safety.

**A regulated leader changes  
the emotional weather  
in the room.**

# 3. Empathy

Empathy is not agreement. It's the willingness to understand.

## Empathetic Leaders:

- stay curious
- reduce defensiveness
- see beyond their own perspective

## Try Asking:

- What matters most to you here?
- What are you worried might happen?
- What would help us move forward together?

## Remember:

**People calm down when they feel understood.**

# 4. Accountability

Accountability is the ability to repair trust.

## Accountable Leaders:

- own their impact
- acknowledge harm
- reset when needed

## Accountability Means:

- telling the truth
- honoring boundaries
- repairing ruptures quickly

## Examples:

“My town was sharper than I intended.”

“I interrupted you earlier. Please finish your thought.”

“I need a moment so I can respond thoughtfully.”

# 5. Courage

Courage is not intensity. It's integrity. The ability to stay aligned to values when pressure rises.

## Courageous Leaders:

- speak hard truths respectfully
- invite dissent
- prioritize resolution over ego

## Courage Sounds Like:

“I may not have all the answers.”  
“I see this differently.”  
“Let's stay in the conversation.”  
“Help me understand your perspective.”

## Remember:

**Courage creates cultures where people feel safe enough to be honest.**

## Reflection

Which one can you commit to practicing more this week?

1

**Self-  
Awareness**

notice

2

**Emotional  
regulation**

choose

3

**Empathy**

connect

4

**Accountability**

repair

5

**Courage**

lead

**The future of work will be built by leaders with the emotional capacity to stay human under pressure.**

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# Want to build the future of work and stay human?

We help organizations develop skills that change culture:

- emotional regulation
- courageous communication
- psychological safety
- empathy
- conflict navigation
- trust-building

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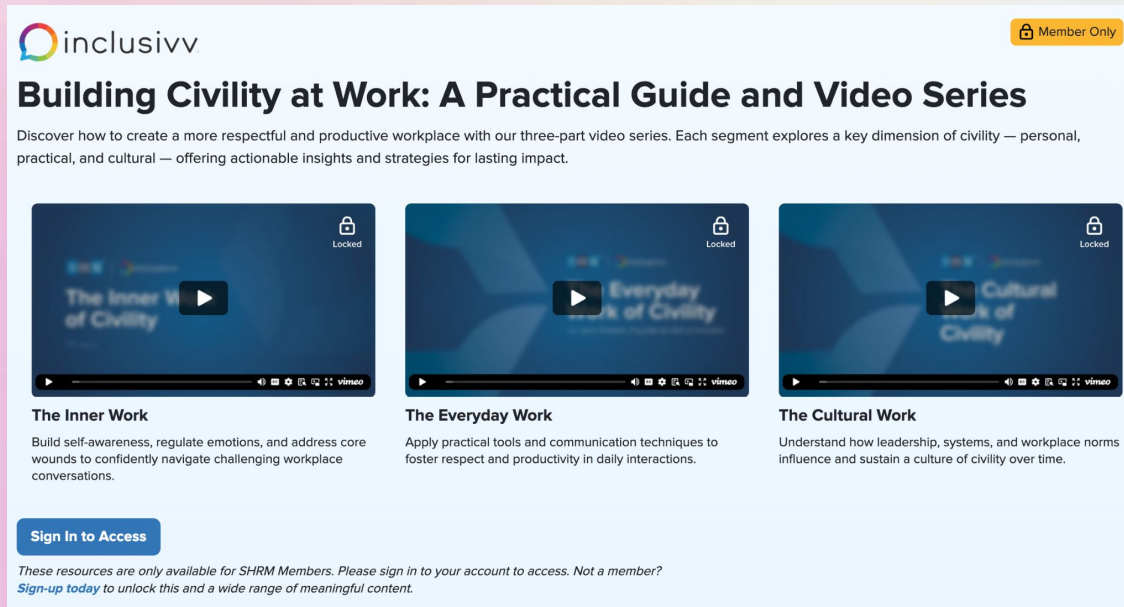
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SHRM member-exclusive resources:

# The Civility at Work video series and Civility Companion Guide

Designed to help individuals, teams, and organizations build the skills and systems needed for civility.



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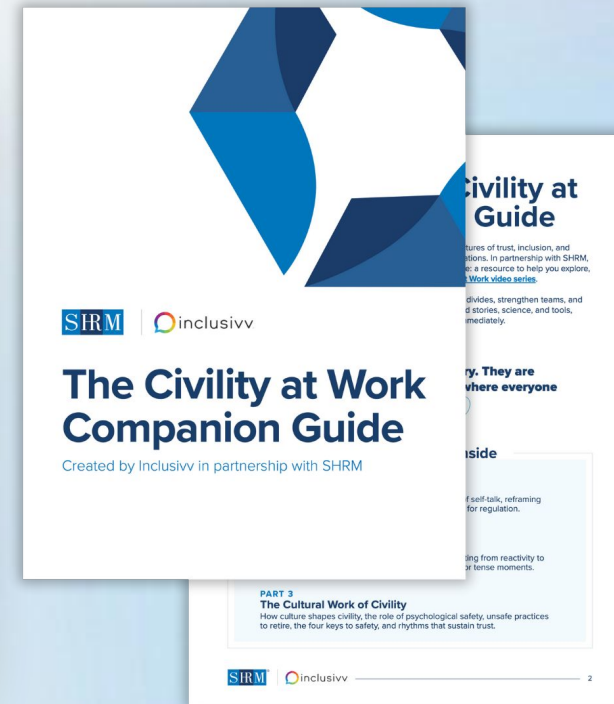
**Building Civility at Work: A Practical Guide and Video Series**

Discover how to create a more respectful and productive workplace with our three-part video series. Each segment explores a key dimension of civility — personal, practical, and cultural — offering actionable insights and strategies for lasting impact.

- The Inner Work**  
Build self-awareness, regulate emotions, and address core wounds to confidently navigate challenging workplace conversations.
- The Everyday Work**  
Apply practical tools and communication techniques to foster respect and productivity in daily interactions.
- The Cultural Work**  
Understand how leadership, systems, and workplace norms influence and sustain a culture of civility over time.

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# Q&A



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