

Effect of home stress on work life

STAFF PERFORMANCE: Employers can mitigate impact of family problems by developing employee welfare programmes

IT is not advisable to bring our home problems to the office; or bring work stresses home. But it is not easy to draw a line between our work and home lives, especially with multi-tasking, flexible working and 24/7 contact of today.

I have spent several years researching the impact incivility has on our professional lives and business productivity. Incivility — non-violent, rude or disrespectful behaviour — can take numerous forms and its effects can vary widely. An act that one individual might simply brush off and forget, for example, might cause deep psychological hurt in another.

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One relatively unexplored area is the impact of incivility in the family environment on job performance. I define sarcasm, shouting at or demeaning someone, or ignoring them altogether as part of family incivility. And, these actions do not necessarily imply an intention to cause hurt.

In the workplace, incivility can be governed by written policies and sanctions, for example, in corporate human resource policies and personnel contracts.

In comparison, expectations about the norms of behaviour are more implicit than formal within the family. Family members may have different perceptions of where the boundaries lie or what is considered “acceptable” or “forgivable”. The consequence is that these propagate negative behaviour within the family.

From a business perspective,

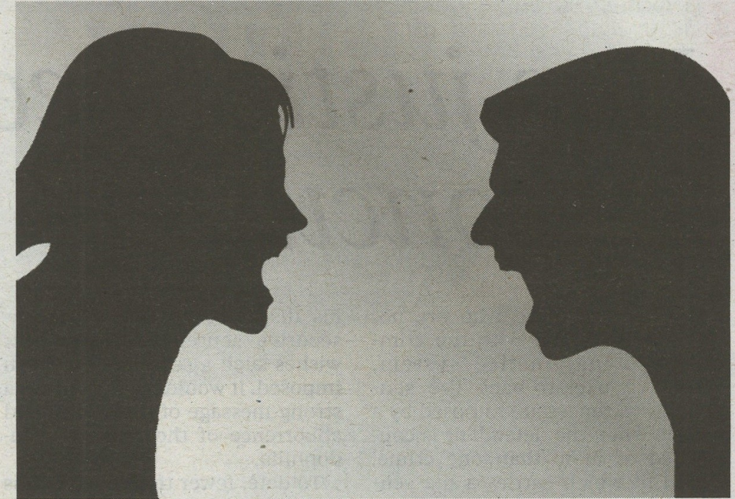
there has been growing understanding in recent years of the importance of employee wellbeing, stress-management and zero-tolerance policies towards workplace abuse. But few employers take time to understand or address how family issues and tensions such as incivility at home can affect employee performance. Employers tend to dismiss these issues as harmless and display little empathy towards affected staff.

Yet, understanding incivility’s effects and the characteristics of individuals who are more vulnerable to its detrimental impact is important to avoid compromising the welfare of employees and employers. We surveyed more than 200 employees and found that family incivility can have much more impact than is commonly thought.

Beyond creating a toxic family environment where self-worth is undermined and family ties damaged, we found that experiencing disrespect within the family can create psychological distress at work which lowers employee performance.

Individuals worry and feel anxious about these issues and agonise over how to resolve them. As a result, their energy levels go down, making them less able to concentrate on their work — fuelling a cycle of unhappiness and unproductivity.

Likewise, as with victims of bullying who become bullies themselves, those who experience incivility may also go on to deliver it in the workplace — in part because they have come to see such be-



Incivility at home results in a toxic family environment and leads to psychological distress at work, which lowers employee performance.

haviour as “normal”. In one example, an employee was reprimanded for repeated sarcastic comments towards his co-workers; something he thought was funny but which had come to bother his colleagues.

Not everyone is affected by family incivility. We found that employees who have higher self-esteem experience less family incivility than those with lower self-esteem.

The first group feels they have better control of such situations and can handle the detrimental effects of family incivility. The second group becomes more psychologically distressed and doubtful about their power to change the family situation. To resolve tensions, they may minimise contact with family members and spend more time at work, a response which can backfire because spending more time at work only

aggravates work-family conflict.

Companies can develop employee welfare programmes to mitigate the impact of family tension. Such activities might involve sponsored family therapist seminars to help employees recognise whether they have family issues, and how to address them to minimise impact on their work.

In contrast to physical abuse, uncivil behaviours are often tolerated at home and can be easily perpetuated by anyone in the family. This leads to a situation where the employee may not realise the frequency to which such incivility occurs or that it is affecting his work.

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