The Cost of Incivility: Understanding Its Impact on Productivity with Jim Link

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Shari SImpson: Joining me today is Jim Link, the Chief Human Resources Officer for the Society of Human Resource Management. His leadership touches the lives of over 362 million workers, where he champions inclusive workplaces and advises organizations on HR best practices. As a respected thought leader, Jim is a frequent speaker and media commentator on workforce trends and the future of work.

Shari SImpson: Jim, as always, I am glad that I was able to sit down with you and spend a few minutes actually on election day here at the SHRM Inclusion Conference. So thanks for stopping by.

Jim Link: Thanks, Shari. It's always my pleasure to be here. I enjoy these conversations.

Shari SImpson: So what are some of the biggest challenges that you're seeing around civility today? And I think today of all days, this is top of mind for us.

Jim Link: It is absolutely top of mind. All you have to do is turn on the TV and, or listen to the news or check your favorite podcast, right? To understand that this is clearly an issue that not only SHRM is trying to tackle and understand, but that more importantly, our society at large is trying to tackle and understand. The great news is civility is one of those things that when done correctly in an organization is immediately recognizable and reproduces all kinds of outcomes. Both on that can be measured very, very directly, but also more so about the way an organization feels and how that culture expounds and expands based upon what happens around civility.

Shari SImpson: So Sherm's been watching this for a while now. I would say pretty intently from an outsider's perspective, at least the last 12 months. What is the current data that you guys are gathering saying about the state of civility right now?

Jim Link: Well, Shari, the data is absolutely gobsmackingly terrible is the way that I would package it up for you. So why do I think that? 201 million acts of incivility each day are reported by American workers. That's 201 million. If you think about that over the course of how that impacts not just the employee morale, the culture of any organization, but how it impacts things that are downstream, like things at home, things in the community, not to mention the impact on business. So our estimates are that those acts of incivility, along with absenteeism, which is also a byproduct of this, are generating roughly $1.2 billion in lost productivity per day in the American workforce. I know it's stunning. That's with a B. Yeah, I mean, just so your listeners didn't mishear me, it's with a B. And if we think about business leaders, which I often do try and think about those folks, If you're not paying attention to this, you're missing an important component of your workplace. And those acts of incivility,

well, just another number, just to keep this fresh. So 80% of the people that responded to our survey indicated that they believed that any political affiliation that they could demonstrate in the workplace would lead to actions by others against them in a negative way. Wow. Eighty percent. So, whichever side of the equation you're on, it doesn't seem to matter in this case. If you're on one side or the other, you feel like the other side is looking at you in a way, right, that could potentially be disadvantageous to you as an employee in the workplace. If that's the belief, it doesn't take long for that to evolve into other things in the workplace, which are more difficult to manage. and could actually lead to things that could result in acts of physical violence or certainly acts of intimidation. Employers should be thinking about that and addressing that through the lens of civility. And I think that we have enough data now, just in those numbers I just shared with you, we have just enough data to indicate that this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Shari SImpson: How do you combat this idea of having great civil conversations in the workplace and everything we see that's happening in society? Because we are not going to be able to impact society that way. We're going to have to do it from the inside out, right? Inside our organizations out. What are some of the tactics that you're talking to people about to really start to paint the picture that, yeah, we might not agree on ABC topic, but civility is where we're going to find our connection.

Jim Link: That's right. It's a foundational component of the way that we should think about the workplace. So it is okay for organizations to say it is an expectation in this company or in this organization, whatever it is, right, company, large or small, that civility is a requirement to work here. It is absolutely okay to say that. And you can define that civility in whatever way you feel or deem appropriate based upon your business or your industry or even your location. But setting civility as a foundational component of that workplace culture in my mind is absolutely the best place to start. And Shari, what's even more fascinating is there is a connectivity between civility and productivity and inclusivity and transparency and all these other things that you get if you think about civility as that starting point, as that place to begin. So, we're encouraging employers to first of all say that. Civility is a requirement, it's part of our culture in this organization and you have to be civil in order to work here. Then the second thing is to establish what those boundaries are. I actually think of it as, remember when you were learning how to bowl and there were the bumper guards on the lanes? So what employers need to do is basically establish what those bumper guards are, right? So as long as we're having civil discourse and we're learning from each other and we're establishing that dialogue is a good thing in our organization, that to me, that's the bowling lane you want to be in. And you know, if those conversations go to a place where that they bump against that bumper guard, then that's not okay. And so we just have to establish what those are. And they're going to be slightly different for every organization. The third thing then is to teach

people what that means through learning and development, training and development, whatever your mechanism is to share what those expectations are, then by all means go and do that. And then the next thing is managers and leaders not only need to be trained, but they have to be the role models. They absolutely have to be the folks in an organization who understand that civility is a requirement and they model that behavior.

Shari SImpson: Yeah, I had a leader a couple years ago who, at our first kind of all hands HR meeting, so it was the first meeting where we had actually combined L&D, TA, and HR together under one umbrella. She was a new leader and she came in and she told this story about, she wanted us to imagine that we're all in a boat together, like a whitewater rafting boat. That was the concept. So we're all in this boat together and that when we start to infight, when we start to talk poorly about, you know, HR's talking poorly about TA, TA's, you know, ragging on L&D for their onboarding program, that we're poking holes in the boat. And she's like, but you're in that boat that you're poking the hole in. And she set the expectation that as a team, I don't want anybody on our team poking holes in our boat. And at first I thought it was kind of a silly example. But just a couple months later, I had a teammate that wasn't behaving in a way that I thought was positive. And I could just tell I was getting frustrated with them. And I was able to go to them and say, OK, I feel like we're having a poking hole in the boat moment right now. And I'm going to be vulnerable and share something with you. And hopefully you can know it's coming from a place that I want to be in the boat with you. And so because of that, I want to have this conversation. It was one of the most productive conversations I've had of my career with another peer.

Jim Link: Absolutely, and I'm pleased that you were courageous enough to actually engage in that conversation with someone, and what had to be a difficult conversation, right? Certainly, it might have started out that way. But listen, today when I think about where we are in society, certainly, and perhaps in some workplaces, we're not thinking about poking holes in the boat. We're actually trying to throw people out of the boat. So what I want us to do is to re-engage in what it is that gets you onto the boat, keeps you on the boat, and then most importantly, helps you navigate that river successfully. If you want to follow that analogy, that is exactly what we need to focus on as businesses. I believe you've probably heard, I think I've said this before, Shari, to you and other conversations we've had, change in the world begins in the workplace. We can't rely upon society, upon government, upon anybody else to do that. The main things that really drive change in our society begin here. right, where we are all every day. That's the whole purpose of this conference we're at today, the inclusion conference, right, is to ensure that people understand that inclusive cultures and inclusive behaviors drive better business results. Can't deny that. Every statistic, every fact, every long-term study that you look at indicates that inclusive thinking drives better business outcomes. So, with that as the mindset, how do you build

inclusivity? You build inclusivity, in my mind, as a starter set by ensuring that civility is in place in that work.

Shari SImpson: Yeah. You know, as we sit here, I'm thinking about what tomorrow is going to feel like for our HR friends. No matter which way the election goes, tomorrow is going to be a hard day, I think, for those in our space. What do we do as HR professionals to tackle some of that language we've talked about? So let's say you don't have the policy in place. You haven't done that work yet. You're just getting started, right? And you start to see this turmoil in your organization. What's like the first step, the first way HR can get in front of somebody and say, like, hey, this is not okay. This is not how we're going to act.

Jim Link: I think, first of all, you have to recognize and then acknowledge whatever those behaviors are that aren't acceptable. And you're right. Tomorrow, half of our workplaces, right, half of our population, if you believe the polls and the statistics, are going to be unhappy. Half. So that means that the other half will feel like that they're a winner, right? And I'm sure that some of that gloating and ego and so those other things are going to spill over in ways. But the folks who win have an equal opportunity and maybe the first step to reach across the aisle, right? To literally extend their hand to another human being in their workplace who may not feel or be aligned with him in the same way that they are, at least politically. That outreach to me means everything. And just like you remember that conversation that you shared a little bit earlier, I'm sure the person on the other side of that conversation remembers it as well. And I have never engaged in an opportunity to reach out to someone who I thought might be struggling or going through a tough time whenever that wasn't viewed as being appreciated and valued by that employee. So that's where we begin. We reestablish that kindness is okay, that it is absolutely imperative that we as business leaders and we as a society begin to reestablish the idea that the way we move forward is by understanding and appreciating another person's viewpoint. Doesn't mean we have to agree with it. But if you have a culture of learning in your organization, you're absolutely going to have people who are trying to understand the position of another human. And that understanding is an active learning as well as an active compassion.

Shari SImpson: And that concept, that curiosity concept, if you can, you can master that in how you approach situations, you become like a master problem solver. You know, when you, when you're like, Hey, I, tell me more about your point of view. How did you get to that conclusion? You know, and, and be genuinely curious. It's, it's fascinating. The things that I've learned that I've been like, Oh, I never thought about it from that angle or, oh, I didn't realize that was impacting you that way or whatever that thing might be, you know. So getting curious is really good. I know that SHRM has worked on a lot of resources for HR professionals in this space. What are some of the big ones that you want people to make sure they know that they have access to?

Jim Link: Well, first of all, I want them to go to sherm.org backslash

civility. And I want them to look at the webpage that opens whenever
they do that. What they're going to find are a plethora of resources.
And my favorite one is the five-step guide to civil conversations in
the workplace, right? So there are many like that, including how to
navigate through this political morass in which we find ourselves
right now. and how you can best activate as an HR employee, but maybe
more importantly as a human being, in understanding the other side and
understanding what you can do to actually encourage that dialogue. I,
like you, believe that one of the best things you can do, whether you
work in human resources or whether you're a manager or a leader or
just an interested human being, is to engage in that dialogue. And you
can say things like, is it okay if we talk about this? Are you open to
feedback? I acknowledge how you feel about that, right? There are so
many things that you can say that validate the other person, whether
or not you agree with them. I mean, many people who are listening to
this are probably married, right? And they have learned over the years
in dealing with their spouse or their partner or their significant
other, they've learned what those triggers are. Right? You know the
things that you avoid, but you also know whenever you need to have a
conversation, how, in many cases, how you get into that conversation.
And in, at least in my married life, that begins with acknowledging
that the other person has a viewpoint and that I am indeed interested
in hearing about it.
Shari SImpson: Yeah. What do you say to those who are listening who
say that they've gotten feedback from their leaders? Like, civility is
just one more squishy word I have to, I have to tackle.
Jim Link: Yeah, let the numbers do the talking, right? I mean, if you
go onto that website we were talking about a little bit earlier, you
will absolutely see that the math works in support of civility. It
works in support of inclusivity. And whichever one of those statistics
or pieces of information or data appeals to you, build upon that. Let
that be your discussion point. I've never had a discussion with a
business leader, particularly one who's running a line or responsible
for a profit and loss center, who wasn't interested in a conversation
where the first words out of my mouth were a numeric instead of a
feeling or a belief. So civility is more than a feeling or a belief.
It is absolutely a business imperative.
Shari SImpson: So what haven't I asked you that is important for our
audience to know in this space? And I feel like this is one of those
things that could be, we could talk about all day. I'm sure tactics
and there's a ton of stuff we could talk about, but what's one thing
you really want this population to know?
Jim Link: I would like for your listeners to understand that civility
as a topic is not something that we came up with just based upon what
Sherm thought was the right thing to do. We heard from our members
that something was going on out there in the workplaces with which
they either didn't identify, couldn't understand, or didn't like. When
we began to ask questions about what that was, we didn't call it
civility at first. We didn't know what it was that we were chasing,
but we understood that members were telling us something that we

needed to pay attention to. As we researched and started asking questions, we saw that it was about behavior, and the behavior particularly of others, and not just colleagues and peers, but supervisors and managers and executives and even entire companies and their positions and the way they were thinking about this. where they appeared to have lost the art of civility. So we began to think about how to impact this. So we launched a One Million Civil Conversations campaign in March of 2024 down at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. And we've been stunned by the reaction that this has had, not just from human resources professionals, but from business leaders and government officials and others who are interested in this idea that reintroducing the idea of kindness and respect and trust and civility in the workplace is probably going to be an answer for a lot of other problems.

Shari SImpson: I love it. Well, Jim, as always, thanks for sitting down and chatting with me.

Jim Link: My pleasure, Shari.