

Rudeness at work is contagious

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Researchers Eva Torkelson, Kristioffer Holm and Martin Bäckström. Credit: Gunnar Menander

Workplace incivility should be treated with the utmost seriousness. This is the finding of three psychologists at Lund University in Sweden who surveyed nearly 6 000 people on the social climate in the workplace. Their studies show that being subjected to rudeness is a major reason for dissatisfaction at work and that unpleasant behaviour spreads if nothing is done about it.

Rudeness in this context refers to something that goes under the radar for what is prohibited and that in some way violates the norm for [mutual](#)

respect. It can refer to petty behaviour such as excluding someone from information and cooperation, or "forgetting" to invite someone to a communal event. It can also refer to taking credit for the work of others, spreading rumours, sending malicious emails, or not giving praise to subordinates.

"It's really about behaviour that is not covered by legislation, but which can have considerable consequences and develop into outright bullying if it is allowed to continue", says Eva Torkelson, who is leading the project on rudeness as a social process in organisations, which is financed by FORTE, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare.

She observes that bullying in the workplace is quite a well-documented phenomenon, whereas rudeness that risks turning into bullying is not.

The research team's studies show that the most common cause of acting rudely is imitating the behaviour of colleagues.

In total, 75 % of the survey respondents stated that they had been subjected to rudeness at least 1-2 times in the past year.

"An important finding from our studies is that those who behave rudely in the workplace experience stronger social support, which probably makes them less afraid of negative reactions to their behaviour from managers and colleagues", says Martin Bäckström, Professor of Psychology.

As people often imitate the behaviour of others, there is a risk that rudeness becomes a vicious circle with considerable consequences for the entire workplace. Previous research points to mental illness, reduced job satisfaction, staff members who work less efficiently or seek jobs elsewhere, reduced loyalty and more conflicts.

But what can be done to address unpleasant behaviour that is a little unclear and hard to put your finger on?

Eva Torkelson thinks that the solution is training for staff and managers:

"When people become aware of the actual consequences of [rudeness](#), it is often an eye-opener", she says. "And, of course, most people do not want to be involved in making the [workplace](#) worse."

More information: Kristoffer Holm et al. Models of Workplace Incivility: The Relationships to Instigated Incivility and Negative Outcomes, *BioMed Research International* (2015). [DOI: 10.1155/2015/920239](#)

Provided by Lund University

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