

# Building Civility

*The University of Minnesota is committed to providing outstanding educational experiences and a positive and supportive environment in which to work and learn.*

When offensive, hostile, and intimidating behavior occurs, it interferes with one's ability to do well. In fact, 80% of respondents in a recent U of M survey who experienced these destructive behaviors said that it 'somewhat or completely' prevented them from doing their best work.

Departmental leadership can have a big impact on their unit's environment. How to get started in promoting a healthy and productive climate? One step is to regularly and proactively communicate the importance of a positive climate in your department (even if it is not something you are immediately concerned about). Frequently communicating that a supportive climate is a core value for your department (along with taking some of the other steps outlined below) often goes a long way to achieving one.

Another important step is to assess the political-cultural landscape:

- How can you support the things that are going well?
- What problematic issues come up over and over again?
- What is the level of your concern?

## Levels of Concern

Level One - Apathetic / Disconnected

People look out for themselves, perhaps compete with others for scarce resources.

Level Two - Micro-aggressions

Subtle, offensive comments; may be directed at a non-dominant group. May be intentional or unintentional.

Level Three - Abrasive Behavior

Offensive, hostile, intimidating behavior that interferes with one's ability to work and learn. May be intentional or unintentional.

Level Four - Abusive Behavior

Systematic destructive behaviors directed at individuals over time with serious negative consequences.

\* The kinds of behaviors identified above are often normalized, tolerated, or difficult to identify.



## Pro-active Steps to Building a Healthy Culture

*These seemingly small initiatives can help people feel part of a larger enterprise and build stronger departmental identity and community.*

- Design informal social opportunities or spaces, such as a monthly sponsored 'pizza lunch', to encourage positive interactions among students, staff, and faculty. Set up a sponsored coffee lounge in a comfortable space.
- Include a page on your department's website focusing on your unit's commitment to a positive culture; include information on ["Wellness Matters"](#) and [Active Bystanders](#).
- Develop group norms, check in regularly to see if they are working. Encourage faculty to use a "Welcome to My Lab" letter (hotlink). Challenge the notion that graduate advising is simply replicating one's own experience as a graduate student. Encourage students with a variety of career goals.
- Identify faculty liaisons who are available for students to talk with informally about their concerns.
- Assign advising mentors to assist new faculty and those advisers who are experiencing difficulties in training and graduating their advanced students.
- Dig deeper into the root causes of significant, long-standing problems through anonymous surveys (hotlink) or other assessment tools. Provide workshops to departmental personnel on how to better manage problematic issues.
- Provide incentives for improving advising and mentoring of graduate and professional students. Establish consequences for not meeting departmental standards.

## Addressing Problems

*Don't do nothing* if someone comes to you for help with a problem. Resist the temptation to overlook difficulties that arise. While some problems will resolve themselves, those that remain will only get worse – sometimes much worse – over time.

*Listen* to the person raising the issue; be aware of power differences.

*Consult* with campus experts, especially on serious issues such as abusive behavior. Your collegiate associate dean is also a resource for you in such matters.

*Act with care*, so as not to make the problem worse. Not sure what to do? Try something you think might help, reassess, and stay engaged; remember small actions can have large effects.

## Resources

### Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu  
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall  
Contact: Jan Morse

### Office for Conflict Resolution

www.ocr.umn.edu  
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall  
Contact: Julie Showers

### Graduate School

www.grad.umn.edu  
612.625.2815, 321 Johnston Hall  
Contact: Karen Starry