Serendipitous Learning

I was sitting in a conference devoted to the topic of conflict management. This seemed to be a really important topic, given all of the now public effort to stop incivility in the workplace. The group came from many professions: nursing, medicine, law, social work, psychology, and so on. We were in a rather remote (there was no phone service, no Internet, no TV, and no newspapers) area of the country. Actually, we were somewhat far from major civilization. The setting was peaceful, the food was locally grown or raised, and the amount of quiet time was perfect. Somehow I didn’t even read the books I brought. But, what was going on in the world?

During one of the sessions, one of the participants told a personal story of what we now would call uncivil behavior. This story made an impression on me. It didn’t leave my mind. The messages became clear to me.

First, as I thought about this story and others of a similar ilk, the lack of responsiveness of the system seemed to play a big part in the final act of incivility. The system identified steps and procedures and paperwork to resolve the issue and interim “chewing gum and baling wire” fixes. What the system didn’t do was fix the problem. In this case the person was concerned about patient safety; and the requests that were made went unheeded, except for the “gum and wire” approach. I began wondering what in our systems conflicts with our views, individually and collectively, about what is safe for us at work and what is safe in patient care.

Second, I began to think of the pride, or at least justification, we take in sharing the workarounds we have created for problems we face on a regular basis. Nurses in direct contact with patients still stash the linens, borrow medications (unless the medication administration system prevents this), take on the task of runner to get the necessary equipment, and hide the broken equipment (often denying knowledge of whatever happened to the XYZ). I then thought about what I have done as workarounds. When the computers went down, I used my cell phone for important messages. When one part of the web-based learning system didn’t work, I used my cell phone for important messages. When one part of the web-based learning system didn’t work, we used another.

So, what really are workarounds? Are they not the potential signs of emerging incivility? We forgive when something goes wrong the first time, and maybe even the second. But when the system problems aren’t addressed, our workarounds become more intense and public. We have viewed workarounds as learning about new ways to give care, teach classes, complete reports, and so on. In reality we should be viewing workarounds as potential precursors to incivility. (By now you may be thinking that I had too much fresh air and launched into wild thinking patterns.) This thinking made sense to others.

My new goal is to listen to the workaround stories we tell and try to hear how the system doesn’t work rather than how clever we are at figuring out solutions. We all should be grateful that we do figure out solutions to work around problems. Now it is time to delve into how to correct the problems. You may disagree with me about workarounds being potential “early alerts” for incivility. You may delight in hearing the latest solution to make something work that should have worked in the first place but doesn’t. I too rejoice in our collective genius. However, we can be even more clever if we take those stories and use them as the lights to guide us to the real issues. We cannot afford to let the workarounds fester or cover up the issues. We can all learn from what we see every day and share a new insight into being proactive about problems. We can reflect on what we did during the day that perpetuated the idea that working around an issue is a good thing. We can reflect on instances where we saw overt incivility and then heard the story of how frequently prior points about a problem were ignored. We can exceed our expectations for intervening early in workplace problems so that we all may do our best every day.

The intent of the conference planners was for us to discuss successful ways to deal with conflict. My serendipity took me to another place: how to decrease some of it. What did you learn by chance today?