

Leadership in Polarized Times: Four Practices for Success



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The Business Case for Civility in the Workplace

Workplace divisiveness can harm productivity, morale, and collaboration. According to [this recent report](#), 91% of American workers report experiencing ideological clashes in the workplace. Conflicts over sensitive topics, social issues, and political polarization have led to strained workplace relationships and decreased team cohesion. According to [SHRM's Civility Index](#), U.S. organizations collectively lose more than \$1.2 billion in reduced productivity per day due to workplace incivility. Additionally, the [American Psychological Association's "Stress in America"](#) report discusses the impact of political stress on workplace dynamics, noting that such stress can lead to increased absenteeism and decreased collaboration among employees, not to mention the [ever-increasing stress of front-line or telephone service jobs](#).

This guide equips leaders with practical insights, actionable strategies, and 19 free, publicly available tools to help manage workplace tensions, strengthen team connections, and foster a culture of mutual respect in a polarized environment.

As workplaces navigate this increasingly complex environment, leaders play a critical role in fostering respect, professionalism, and open dialogue. CUES, drawing on insights from our partners in higher education and talent development, has created this guide to help credit union leaders proactively address workplace tensions. By prioritizing civility and thoughtful leadership, organizations can strengthen team synergy, maintain productivity, and create a culture of respect that allows employees—and the industry—to thrive.

Monitor the Emotional Climate



To be most effective, leaders should maintain awareness of team dynamics and address tensions quickly.

Strategic Actions:

- Conduct regular check-ins to discuss any concerns or stressors employees may be experiencing.
- Promote a culture of feedback: Take this opportunity to reinforce existing feedback mechanisms where employees can safely express their thoughts and concerns.
- Consider a virtual pulse taker. Gather fast, anonymous feedback using tools like [Google Forms](#), [SurveyMonkey](#), and [Typeform](#).



LISTEN: The podcast episode [How to Curb Workplace Incivility](#) from The Wharton School discusses insights on managing workplace civility inspired by issues across the healthcare industry.



LEARN: Difficult conversations are inevitable at work, and avoidance leads to festering problems and escalating issues. Learn how to [Lean Into the Discomfort](#) and make your workplace more productive.



READ: Promote understanding and reduce friction among team members, as suggested in [Navigate Complexity More Effectively with a “Both/And” Mindset](#) by CUES VP/Talent Development Programming Chad Helminak.

Reinforce Existing Policies



As leaders, it's important to remind employees of established policies on workplace conduct. Approach these conversations thoughtfully and align policies with a respectful work environment.

Strategic Actions:

- Highlight the availability of stress management resources, such as counseling services or wellness programs, and encourage employees to take advantage of these offerings to manage stress effectively.
- Incorporate policy discussions into leadership and team meetings to create open dialogue and a shared understanding of how policies contribute to a positive workplace.
- Conduct a spot review of the existing policies to ensure they are up to date and comply with state and federal law.



LISTEN: Check out [CUES Digital Learning](#) and [CUES Online University](#) for courses on policy and compliance, providing valuable insights and tools for both leaders and employees.



LEARN: CUES members can also leverage resources on creating positive and productive workplaces such as “Ethics at Work” and “Leading People” from [HarvardManageMentor](#).



READ: Consider employee psychological safety as described in [3 Steps Leaders Should Take in the Face of DEI Rollbacks](#).

Encourage Respectful Dialogue



Facilitate open communication while ensuring discussions remain civil and focused on shared goals.

Strategic Actions:

- Guide leadership to conduct team meetings where employees can voice concerns in a safe environment.
- Advocate for internal training on active listening and empathy.
- Model and reinforce a culture of respectful dialogue from the top by consistently communicating its value in meetings, emails, and one-on-one interactions.



READ: HBR's [Make Your Meetings a Safe Space for Honest Conversation](#) emphasizes the importance of psychological safety to enhance collaboration, innovation, and team effectiveness.



LEARN: Prioritize self-awareness as a leadership competency and learn how to foster a culture of openness and mutual respect by [Choosing Trust Over Fear](#).



LEARN: The National Credit Union Foundation's (NCUF) guide to [Putting Empathy Into Action](#) illustrates simple and shareable ideas for practicing empathy and feeling comfortable supporting others.

Lead by Example



Leading by example is a powerful way to influence workplace culture. When leaders consistently model the behavior they expect from their teams, it reinforces the importance of those values across the organization.

Strategic Actions:

- Be open about not needing to agree on all things with all people, and how a civil approach to disagreement can actually increase mutual respect, productivity, and innovation.
- Share your personal strategies for managing stress and maintaining neutrality. This transparency not only humanizes leaders but also provides employees with practical tools they might adopt.
- Recognize and reward those who contribute positively to the work environment, reinforcing the value of collegial collaboration.



READ: Build a diverse “team of rivals” to foster innovation and resilience in uncertain times, as suggested in the article [What Leaders Need Now More Than Ever: A ‘Team of Rivals’](#) from the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia.



LEARN: Explore this article about [Compassion in the Workplace](#), detailing the importance and benefits of leading from a place of compassion and kindness.



LISTEN: Adapting your leadership style can lead to a positive change in the workplace, as discussed in the HBR podcast episode [Defining and Adapting Your Leadership Style](#).

Invest in Leadership Development



Investing in leadership development strengthens organizational resilience, equipping leaders at all levels to navigate challenges with confidence. Strong leadership encourages adaptability, enhances team dynamics, and creates opportunities for meaningful growth. At CUES, we provide expert-led courses, peer networking, executive coaching, and innovative industry insights to help you build a culture of resilience and collaboration—ensuring your teams thrive, even in times of uncertainty.

Strategic Actions:

- Focus on leadership development that emphasizes skills for long-term thinking and effective decision-making, such as scenario planning, crisis communication, and
- Develop mentorship initiatives where experienced leaders can guide emerging talents, fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth.



LEARN: Encourage next-in-line leaders to sign up for the next cohort of [CUES Advanced Management Program](#) from Cornell University, or the three-month [CUES Essential Leadership Program](#). CUES Members can also leverage the expertise of [CUES Consulting](#) to receive real-time guidance and actionable tools on leadership development and workplace civility.

Take The Next Step

MONITOR THE EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

[How to Curb Workplace Incivility](#)

[Leaning Into Discomfort: Managing Difficult Conversations at Work](#)

[Navigate Complexity More Effectively with a “Both/And” Mindset](#)

REINFORCE EXISTING POLICIES

[CUES Digital Learning](#)

[CUES Online University](#)

[HarvardManageMentor](#)

[3 Steps Leaders Should Take in the Face of DEI Rollbacks](#)

ENCOURAGE RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

[Make Your Meetings a Safe Space for Honest Conversation](#)

[Choosing Trust Over Fear](#)

[Putting Empathy Into Action](#)

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

[What Leaders Need Now More Than Ever: A ‘Team of Rivals’](#)

[Compassion in the Workplace](#)

[Defining and Adapting Your Leadership Style](#)