

DEFINING CIVILITY

Many people today confuse the notion of civility with a form of fakery, where people hide their own feelings about something or someone to avoid conflict. Others view civility and politeness as a form of weakness that invites bullying and leads to sacrificing personal positions, goals, and feelings for no good reason. These misconceptions make the idea of civil behavior appear useless and ineffective in society. Unfortunately, by abandoning the practice of civility we create a society that is closer to Thomas Hobbes' pessimistic notion of the natural state of man, which is to say it is "nasty, brutish, and short."³

Instead, it is useful to conceive of civility in relation to "civilization" and "being civilized." *Civility* in these contexts does not mean fakery. Rather, it means the ability to have lasting, stable, and peaceful interactions with others. If we consider the world we live in today as civilized, it is because we practice civility, and without treating such practices as sincere we risk degrading the civilization in which we live. In this part of the chapter we will explore some of the components that serve as the foundation of civility. Understand that each of these is a component of civility, but on their own they are not synonymous with it. We will begin with some definitional terms, and then discuss how civility functions with regard to the way we present ourselves. We will conclude this section with an overview of some civil behaviors in different contexts.

civility

the use of tact when dealing with others; a genuine and reciprocal expression of respect for ourselves and other people through our actions and statements

Components of Civility

"Civility" is a broad term that encompasses parts of several other concepts in its application. Any one of these behaviors on its own does not constitute civility, but rather their combination helps lead us to an understanding of what it means to actually be civil. In this section of the chapter we will discuss five different concepts that when taken together create a more substantial definition of civility.

Politeness

We mentioned a moment ago that civility is often confused with politeness. This is understandable because politeness is a component of civility; however, the two are not the same thing because civility encompasses more than simply being polite. The term *polite* refers to showing consideration for others in accordance

polite

showing consideration for others in accordance with social decorum

with social decorum. At times it can mean being polished or elegant, but on a basic level politeness is the use of tact in dealings with others. Politeness, therefore, may be best understood in contrast to rudeness, which is acting in a way that violates social decency or demonstrates a lack of social skills and appreciation for others. On the one hand, people who are deemed polite have made some effort to consider other people and how they feel. On the other hand, we sometimes view politeness in others not as a nicety, but as a tool to manipulate and deceive us or as a condescending form of communication.⁴

To understand this odd approach to politeness, let's look at how the term is used. If we attend a concert or a comedy club act and the performance is not very good we still feel the need to give "polite applause" to those on stage. If we cannot, or do not, want to go to a reception or other event we issue a "polite reply" telling the host we will not attend. Then there are times where we feel that the truth may hurt someone's feelings, so we deliver a "polite lie." Each of these instances makes it appear as though we are hiding our feelings, or protecting the feelings of others at the expense of honesty. Politeness is also seen as indirect communication, but one can be direct and polite at the same time. We often conflate directness in communication with rudeness, by being short and not respecting the other person. Envision a scenario in which a person in your class whom you do not know invites you to join a study group, but you prefer studying alone. You could tell very bluntly, "I'm not interested," or you could send the same message by saying, "Thanks for the invitation but I prefer to study on my own." The latter is polite, the former rude.

As you can see, politeness can mask our own feelings, but being civil requires us to assert our feelings in a respectful manner. A civil person is honest, but not in a way that offends the other party. Civil politeness requires that we not be polite just to help spare others the truth, but to make both them and us feel good about

our deeds and actions through an honest and respectful delivery of information. For instance, there should not be a need to issue a polite lie, because it comes across as disingenuous and simply plays upon the perception most people have today when someone is "just being polite." Rather, polite civility issues the truth in a way that does not intentionally hurt anyone involved. This is, as you can imagine, a challenging task to accomplish. Politeness, though, is only one part of the civility equation.



Good Manners

The second component of civility might remind you of children because they are constantly reminded to say "please," and "thank you" as an element of good manners. *Good manners* refers to behaviors that societies deem as appropriate and positive ways of interacting with others. As you can imagine, when understood this way good manners are not

good manners

behaviors that societies deem as appropriate and positive ways of interacting with others

restricted to children, nor are they as simple as just saying "please" and "thank you." In fact, we have even gone so far as a society to police certain types of manners to ensure they are practiced.⁵

There are policies in place in a variety of contexts by both companies and government entities designed to promote the practice of good manners. When we go to the movies we are asked to silence cell phones before the start of the film because holding a conversation and texting during a show distract others from enjoying the movie. Additionally, one of the reasons behind the Federal Aviation Administration's regulations regarding cell phone usage during a flight is, to be sure, safety; however, it is also meant to keep people from having phone conversations in crowded areas. After all, you do not want others to know your personal business, and they do not want to be disturbed by your conversation. These are just two examples of public efforts to maintain good manners.

Despite policies and rules regarding certain behaviors, not all good manners can and should be legislated. In fact, there are other good manners people should practice simply because they demonstrate an appreciation for other people. Here are a few behaviors that are usually considered good manners in American culture with which you may or may not be familiar:

1. Be on time for meetings and appointments.
2. Don't gloat when you win, or sulk when you lose.
3. Don't talk with your mouth full.
4. Patiently wait in line.
5. Don't ask intimate or sensitive questions—even if you ask permission first.
6. Don't make rude or sarcastic comments that devalue the work of others.

These are just a few good manners that respect the other person in an interaction. Such behaviors are a core element of civility and represent practicing politeness. Civility is, however, even more than being genuinely polite and practicing good manners.

Courteousness

A third component of civility is *courteousness*, which refers to showing consideration and attention to others. The term itself derives from "court," but not in the legal sense—rather the courts of kings where people who sought to speak with the monarch displayed an elegance and deference to those of higher stature. Today, courtesy is not as formal, nor does it involve status; rather we talk about certain behaviors as being "common courtesy." Such behaviors are often understood as polite, good manners, and civil, as well.⁶

We often refer to courtesy as *common* because it is generally expected that everyone exhibit these basic behaviors. Common courtesies include things like holding a door open for the next person to come through, standing up to greet someone when they enter your room or office, and acknowledging drivers who

courtesy

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showing consideration
and attention to others

allow you into traffic in front of them. These are the small gestures we can do in a day that cost nothing but generate good feeling by letting others know we value and pay attention to them. At their heart, common courtesies involve an understanding of one's surroundings and respect for others, which brings us to our next component of civility.

Respect for Others

respect

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an acknowledgement
of the inherent
humanity and existence
of other people

Civility requires that we be polite, practice good manners, and extend courtesy to others because it is fundamentally about respecting other people. By *respect* we mean to say an acknowledgement of the inherent humanity and dignity of other people. Respect does not require deference to others, but rather an acknowledgement of them and an attempt to understand how they may feel about a statement, action, or event. One of the worst things we can do to other people is ignore them or behave as though their thoughts, feelings, and opinions do not matter. When such things are done to us we get upset and feel like we do not belong. There is no situation where behaving in such a way toward another person is acceptable.

Respect can come in different levels. It can mean we place individuals or their opinions in high esteem and value them more than others because of an existing relationship or some type of expertise they bring to the table. It can also mean an appreciation for an honor or even the position a person holds. At a minimum, however, we should respect everyone as individuals and acknowledge their feelings and thoughts. Doing so will encourage reciprocity where they return that respect in their interactions with you. This is the road to creating a culture of civility. There is, however, one more dimension of civility we must discuss.

Assertiveness

assertive

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the ability to clearly
and confidently state
our positions

After detailing the first four elements of civility, it may seem as though it largely asks us to suppress our own ideas and thoughts in deference to others, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, civility demands honesty and the ability to clearly and confidently state our positions. This is what it means to be *assertive*, but it is essential we assert ourselves respectfully and not in an effort to dominate or devalue other people and their ideas. Assertiveness is a vital part of being happy and creating a civil society.

It may seem easier to simply try to please others by allowing them to state their positions while we keep ours to ourselves, but such actions actually do not demonstrate a respect for ourselves. One of the hardest things to assert is also the first word many children learn: the ability to say "no." As P. M. Forni, a noted Italian professor who teaches and writes about civility at Johns Hopkins University, notes, "'No' to others is nothing but a 'yes' to ourselves," and in doing so we aren't "taking something that belongs to others; we are simply keeping something that is rightfully ours."⁷ Simply put, when people ask something of us, we are not required to give it, nor are we required to explain why to them though we may feel it right and necessary to do so in some situations. The ability to say "no" to others and "yes" to ourselves is a key element of civility.

We may believe that saying "no" will injure, or perhaps even destroy, our relationship with the other person, but in not protecting our own interests and time we might be doing that anyway.⁸ In freely giving our time, treasure and talents to others, even when we do not want to, we may create an unbalanced relationship with the other person. By this, we mean the other person may come to expect us to always give of ourselves and may not reciprocate. It also can engender our quiet and unexpressed resentment of the other and consistent devaluing of our own ideas, time, and feelings. This is not healthy, nor is it civil. Being assertive simply means we respect ourselves just as much as we respect others. Without this final piece, civility is nothing more than sacrificing oneself to the interests of the other. To that end, we define civility as a genuine and reciprocal expression of respect for ourselves and other people through our actions and statements.

Now that we have explained the characteristics of civility, we will turn our attention to how we practice civility. In the next section we will discuss some communicative dimensions of civility as it relates to how we present ourselves. We will then follow that with covering some basic principles of civil behavior.

Civility and Self-Expression

Creating a civil society naturally involves the way we communicate with each other. This occurs in many different contexts and requires a specific set of abilities for us to effectively, respectfully, and civilly interact with each other. In this part of the chapter we will discuss this set of skills and how they relate to civility.

Facework

Everyone desires others to see them in the best possible light, and so we present our face in a manner that we believe creates that type of impression. The behaviors we employ to maintain this positive image with others are called *facework*. There are three faces we seek to present to others, and each occurs within a different context. These faces also are sometimes threatened by the actions of others or external events we cannot control.



facework
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the behaviors we exhibit to maintain a positive impression of ourselves by other people

We all have a desire to be liked and appreciated. In fact, social relationships and our own psychological and physical health depend on such connections with others. The need to have others like and respect us is fulfilled through the expression of our *fellowship face*. We want others to perceive us as approachable, likeable, and friendly, so we try to create that impression through the way we interact with others. This type of behavior can especially be seen in our initial interactions with new people we meet.

fellowship face
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an effort to fulfill the need to have others like and respect us

Take, for example, the case of Lynn who has just moved into her dormitory room. During the move-in process she meets her new roommate, Olivia, who is still

unloading her belongings from her car. After introducing herself to Olivia, Lynn offers to help unload Olivia's car and move her into the room. This behavior is a manifestation of civility, and also creates a positive fellowship face for Lynn with Olivia.

competence face

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our efforts to promote
our expertise on
subjects to others so
they respect us

The second face we seek to create is less about developing friendships and more about engendering respect from others. When we want others to listen to what we have to say on a topic, we both need and want them to see us as competent, and so the *competence face* refers to efforts to promote our expertise on subjects to others. We all are good at something, and we like it when others recognize our talents, so the competence face is how we want others to see us when it comes to those things we know or are good at doing. This is especially important when we are asked to explain material to non-experts, because we want them to respect what we have to say.

autonomy face

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the perception that we
can do things on our
own and our desire to
avoid others making
decisions for us

The third, and final, face we seek to maintain with others is related to assertiveness. We all want to be seen as capable individuals in our own right who can make decisions and take action on our own without the assistance of others. This is the expression of our *autonomy face*, which refers to when we seek to avoid others' making decisions and doing things for us by being seen as capable in our own right. When we are assertive and respect ourselves, we demonstrate this autonomy, and when we do not we are seen by others as more dependent. As with anything, we are not entirely autonomous or dependent, but we do need to maintain the perception we can do some things on our own.

face threats

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things that threaten
to damage the image
we work to present to
others

Sometimes we encounter things that threaten to damage the image we work to present to others. These *face threats* can come from both internal and external causes. For instance, we may feel like we did not do enough research, practice our presentation enough, or even study enough for an exam. These internal feelings turn into threats to our competence face as the effects of those beliefs may make us appear as less of an expert to others. On the other hand, we may also be in a situation where others around us make jokes at our expense, and we feel the need to respond because these jokes damage our ability for others to like or respect us. How we manage threats to our face is just as important as the face itself. Facework is directly tied to civility, because when people are rude, lack good manners or are not courteous we perceive it as a threat to our face and thus conflict can ensue.

Image Management

We have no single image that we present to all parties. For instance, we seek to have our parents perceive us one way, our friends another, and our colleagues at work yet another way. We also try to maintain consistency with the images each group has of us. You may be familiar with the term "two-faced", which is what we sometimes call people who present two different and conflicting images of themselves in different sorts of situations. Managing multiple images with various groups is both collaborative and complex, but effective management of our situations is a hallmark of being civil.

When we say that *image management* is collaborative, we mean it is a constant result of the interaction between ourselves and others. We seek to present

image management

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the constant attempt to
control the presentation
of ourselves to others

SPOTLIGHTING THEORISTS: P. M. FORNI

P. M. Forni

Pier Massimo Forni is an award-winning Italian literature professor at Johns Hopkins University, where he has taught for the majority of his career. Forni graduated from the University of Pavia in 1974, and received his doctorate in Italian Literature in 1981 from UCLA, where he studied the works of Italian Renaissance author Giovanni Boccaccio. Over his career his work moved toward a discussion of ethics and a commentary on civility in society, particularly the United States, his adoptive home.

In 1997 Forni cofounded the Johns Hopkins Civility Project, which brought together academics and community outreach programs in an effort to assess "the significance of civility, manners, and politeness in contemporary society." He also co-directed

an international symposium in 1998 entitled "Reassessing Civility: Forms and Values at the End of the Century." He has delivered numerous workshops and written several books, including *Choosing Civility: Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, *The Thinking Life*, and *The Civility Solution: What to Do When People are Rude*.



Dr. Forni's work on civility has appeared in a number of press outlets, and he himself has made appearances on numerous television programs to discuss civility in contemporary society. He currently teaches at Johns Hopkins University, where he is also director of the Civility Initiative. His work has inspired similar efforts at a number of other institutions.⁹

ourselves in a specific manner, and other people either accept or do not accept that presentation. In the event they accept our image, we continue to behave in ways that reinforce that image with that particular group. If, however, our image does not seem to be accepted by others, we may adjust and adapt our own understanding of ourselves. This is a way of managing behavior and personal interactions with both ourselves and others in mind.

Image management is also complex because of the multiple audiences with whom we seek to cultivate relationships. To say we present ourselves one way to our friends is even a bit too broad, because we all have different groups of friends with whom we associate and each sees us differently. For instance, a college athlete may have friends on a sports team, in the dormitory, in classes, and from high school who attend different institutions. Each of these groups knows different versions of the student, but the student seeks to maintain an image with each group. We also present different images to our family. This gets even more complex and difficult to manage when different groups are in the same situation. Just think about the first time you and a significant other had dinner with your parents. Which image did you seek to present? This is the challenge of image management, but when we adhere to the principles of civility it lessens the burden of such complicated interactions.

self-monitoring

the ability to be aware of your own behaviors and statements and how they affect other people; can be either high or low

Self-Monitoring

To effectively manage our image and present faces the way we want we must be good communicators, and a major aspect of competent communication is self-monitoring. This skill refers to the ability to be aware of your own behaviors and statements and how they affect other people. To identify your ability level when it comes to self-monitoring, think about it as a line, somewhere upon which you fall. At one end of the line there are low self-monitors, and at the other end are high self-monitors.

Low self-monitors speak and act without thinking of what the effect on others will be. In short, they do not pay attention to what they are saying and doing beyond the immediate moment. This can often cause hurt feelings, emotional outbursts, and misunderstandings and it cultivates the image of a selfish individual. Being civil requires that we think before we speak and act, thus making it necessary for people who tend to act and speak impulsively to become better self-monitors.

High self-monitors, on the other hand, are aware of their behaviors and statements, as well as how they will potentially affect and influence those around them. As we have discussed, being civil requires a genuine respect for others and yourself, and so high self-monitoring is a necessary skill set for a civil society. It allows us to think through what we want to say, and then say it in a manner that respects the other party while still maintaining our own ability to assert our position. It may sound easy enough, but monitoring and thinking about our behavior and statements before we do or say something is a very challenging task. ✕

Self-Restraint → thinking before acting

It might seem a bit odd to include self-restraint as a principle of civil communication when we already said you must be able to assert yourself and your ideas, but it is important to remember to be balanced. Just because you have an idea or a thought does not mean it must be stated or asserted. In fact, learning when to assert yourself is an important situational skill in any profession. To borrow from country singer Kenny Rogers, you have to know when to hold them and know when to fold them.

It is not always imperative that you respond, let alone respond immediately, to comments from others. In fact, often it is best if you wait to do so, especially in emotionally charged situations. If you are upset over something, a grade for example, wait a day before contacting your professor to discuss it so that you can have a calmer and more rational conversation. If someone says something to you that you disagree with, consider what your goal is in responding. The chances of changing the other person's mind may be very small, in which case you may not even want to say something. P. M. Forni, the Italian civility scholar we mentioned a little while ago, notes that silence is not a failure to communicate, but rather an informed choice to process and reflect upon information. Shooting from the hip in response to something often creates a more combative and negative environment that invites uncivil behavior.

self-restraint

the ability to refrain from comments until the time and tone are appropriate to do so

Self-restraint does not imply you deny your own right and ability to assert yourself; instead, it calls for us to concentrate on the best possible way to assert our opinions and positions. Timing and tone are everything. Remember that people will respond to the tone of your voice first, even before they think about what you said. The tone with which you speak can go a long way toward creating a supportive climate for conversation and preserving civility in an interaction. The same words said with a different tone can convey completely opposite things to another person, so measuring your tone of voice and paying attention to the emotions you try and convey when speaking is vital for having productive interactions with others, especially when the topics of discussion are sensitive or controversial. Keep this in mind before you choose to respond and take a minute to process what the other party said.

In today's fast paced society we often feel the need to immediately respond, since everyone seems to be available at almost any time thanks to e-mail and cell phones. Just because you receive an e-mail that demands a reply, it does not require that you reply as soon as you are done reading it. Also, just because someone calls in while you are speaking to someone on the other line does not mean you need to answer it. Self-restraint means we must try to control our inclination to "run after something shiny as soon as we see it" and concentrate on the moment in which we currently reside. It is, simply, thinking before acting. ←

Foundational Civil Behaviors

We could spend an entire book explaining and discussing specific behaviors that are civil, but that is not the aim of the book or this chapter. Instead, we wish to acquaint you with some foundational concepts that inform civil behavior so that they help you understand how to engage in an effective dialogue with other people. To that end, we have covered the root terms of civility and how it relates to the presentation of ourselves to others. The final component of explaining what civility is, however, is a discussion of three foundational behaviors that all civil communication has in common: mutual respect, listening, and disagreeing without being disagreeable.

Mutual Respect

A civil culture depends on its members valuing mutual respect. That is to say, members of society must respect all other members as well as themselves and must be willing to develop and engage in the skills we have discussed in the chapter. Each individual must value the ideas and opinions of others and begin with the precept that everyone seeks the good of the community as whole, until such time as someone demonstrates he or she is not out for that goal. In short, believe in the best that people can be, and respect their values, experiences, and expertise in the same way you wish them to do for you.

Mutual respect is not driven by a person's achievement, position, or title, but rather by his or her inherent humanity and value as a person. All people bring something to the table that we can learn and we must respect that for them to respect what we have to offer. Without genuine mutual respect, we cannot have a



First Inaugural Address by President John F. Kennedy

Delivered January 20, 1960

John F. Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts, was elected president in November 1960 and took the oath of office on Friday January 20, 1961. The Democrat, Kennedy, defeated Republican candidate Richard Nixon and took over as the youngest president in U.S. history for the man who was then the oldest ever to hold that office, Dwight Eisenhower. In his narrow victory, Kennedy also became the

first Roman Catholic president in American history. At the time the United States was deeply ensconced in the Cold War with the communist Soviet Union, during which both countries aggressively pursued nuclear weapons and fought for influence over smaller states around the globe.

Kennedy wrote the speech along with his close advisor, Ted Sorenson, over the course of three months. At 1,364 words the speech took only 13:59 to deliver, making it the fourth shortest inaugural in presidential history. In the address, which presidents use for many purposes including laying out the broad principles of how they plan to govern, Kennedy sought a more collaborative relationship with countries around the globe, including the Soviet Union. His desire for this was embedded in this call: "So, let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us."¹¹ This quotation illustrates a civil approach to public discussion and debate and shows that even when two sides appear to be at such starkly different positions, there is always an opportunity for engagement.

civil society. This is not to say that everyone must behave this way for it to work; in fact, that is not the case even today. It is, however, an invitation to begin the effort of making society more civil by respecting those with whom we come into contact.

Even at the height of the Cold War our leaders were able to, at times, express mutual respect and a desire for civil interaction. In one of the more famous speeches in the twentieth century, then newly elected President John F. Kennedy used his inaugural address to both assert American ideals and extend an invitation for dialogue and negotiation with the Soviet Union. He actually even mentioned civility specifically in an effort to tone down tensions and begin more collaborative communication with the Soviet Union—a communist country at that time understood as a superpower and chief rival to the United States in international affairs.