Course Notes

Incivility

Until recently, workplace rudeness was barely studied. When Chris trained in Edinburgh in the 1980s-90s, no one linked behaviour to performance; there were only 23 academic papers on the topic between 1996 and 2001. A decade later, 1,700 studies (2011-16) converged on one finding: behaviour matters. Incivility—defined not as shouting but as everyday eye-rolling, talking over colleagues, or correcting grammar mid-sentence—erodes individual and collective performance through four inter-locking pathways.

1. The immediate target

Recipients of rudeness do not first feel anger; they feel belittled, powerless, even child-like. Physiologically, the brain interprets disrespect as the thin end of a threat: blood is diverted from the pre-frontal cortex to musculature, and neural circuits switch to a defensive "ready-to-rumble" mode. Cognitive bandwidth shrinks by an average of **61 %**, so in the moment we literally become less intelligent and cannot muster the witty retort that occurs to us hours later ("emotional hooking"). Once the initial shame subsides, **95 %** of people want retaliation, and **80 %** are willing to take revenge on someone who merely represents the offender. A single rude colleague thus leaves a comet-like tail of emotionally primed co-workers across an organisation.

Leaders who indulge in eye-rolling, tutting or sentence-finishing therefore diminish their teams twice: they squeeze colleagues' thinking capacity and they discourage them from sharing information, starving the leader of the data needed for good decisions.

2. The onlookers

For years it was assumed bystanders were unharmed, yet experiments show that merely **witnessing** incivility reduces task performance by **about 20 %**. The drop is steeper among highly empathic staff—the very people companies prize. Witnesses also become **50 % less likely to help** a third party shortly afterwards: negativity is contagious, nudging cultures away from kindness and cooperation.

Incivility

3. The perpetrators

Ironically, people in power are the most frequent offenders. Studies by Paul Piff, Dacher Keltner and others reveal that after promotion, leaders become **three times** more likely to:

use phones or laptops for unrelated work in meetings, interrupt colleagues, and

raise their voices.

This shift is usually unconscious. Faced with “impostor syndrome,” new leaders default to command-and-control, believing certainty signals competence. Yet those later judged “wise” do the opposite: they move from **telling** to **asking**, use questions to pool others’ insights, and thereby make better choices while earning reputations for wisdom.

Notably, incivility also backfires cognitively on the rude person; under stress their own reasoning deteriorates. Thus, bad behaviour harms everyone in the room.

4. The organisational echo

Because recipients displace anger onto symbolic stand-ins and witnesses pass negativity onward, a small number of habitual offenders can warp an entire culture. Allowing them to persist is unsafe for colleagues and ultimately for patients, clients or customers who depend on high-quality decisions.

Practical implications

Awareness is curative. Most offenders repeat behaviour modelled by past mentors; once they understand the measurable damage—61 % bandwidth loss, 20 % performance dip, contagious unkindness—they tend to stop.

Leaders must model curiosity. Shifting from commands to questions protects cognitive resources, harnesses collective intelligence and builds psychological safety.

Address the comet, not just the head. Interventions must acknowledge the ripple effects on bystanders and on displaced aggression, not only reprimand the primary incident.

In summary, decades of new science confirm what courtesy long intuited: even mild incivility is a hidden tax on thinking, collaboration and decision-making. Organisations that value performance must treat respectful behaviour not as optional “politeness” but as critical infrastructure for collective brainpower.

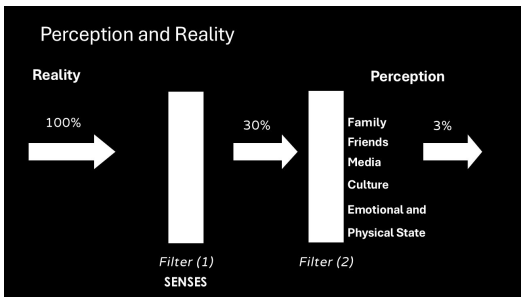
Perception V Reality

3This session explores the crucial difference between perception and reality, emphasizing that while a shared external reality likely exists, our individual perceptions of it vary significantly. Perception is shaped by how we interpret sensory data and our personal experiences, meaning no two people see the world in exactly the same way.

To illustrate, participants are asked to visualize an elephant. The resulting mental images differ widely—ranging from an African elephant on the savannah to a child's stuffed toy or even a cartoon. This simple exercise demonstrates how even a single word can evoke vastly different interpretations. Multiply this across a conversation, and it's clear how easily communication can become distorted.

At the core of this phenomenon is the way information enters our brain. Though reality provides us with 100% of the information, it must pass through our senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. However, our senses are limited. We can't see ultraviolet or infrared light or hear all sound frequencies. Thus, only about 30% of the original information gets through to our brains.

This 30% is further filtered by our internal mental processes, which are shaped by various influences such as family, friends, education, media, culture, religion, and our emotional or physical state. From birth to about age seven—the imprinting stage—our beliefs and values are largely formed. This makes early environment especially impactful. Later, peers, societal norms, and media shape how we interpret information.

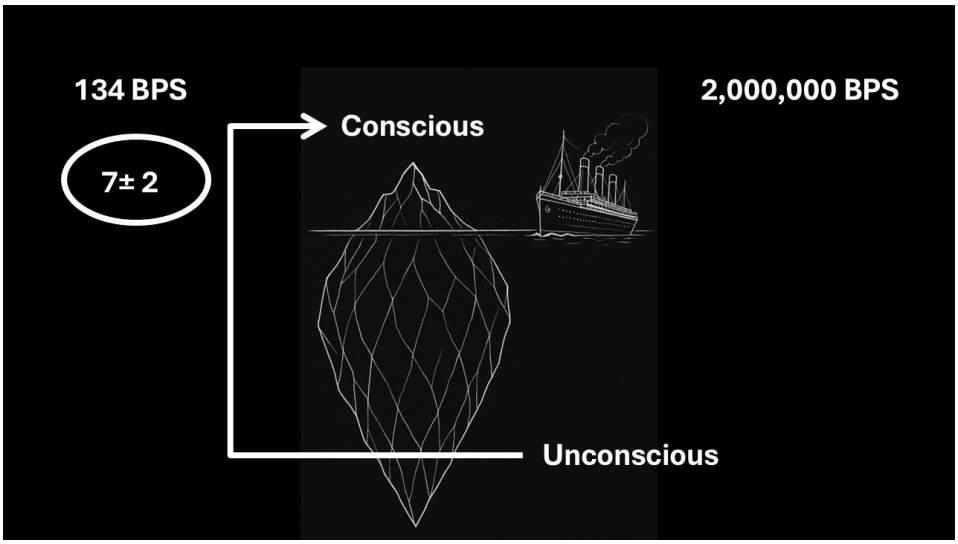


Our brain then applies three key filters to the data: deletion, distortion, and generalization. We delete information that doesn't fit our worldview (e.g., failing to see a plane appear on a runway in a flight simulator because we don't expect it). We distort information to suit our focus (e.g., suddenly seeing many cars like our new one or perceiving many pregnant women when expecting a child). Generalizations help us function efficiently (e.g., expecting solid ground after opening a door) but can also lead to harmful biases like racism or ageism.

Perception V Reality

Ultimately, we are left with a very small fraction—perhaps just 3%—of reality, which forms our “map of the world.” Importantly, your 3% is not the same as someone else’s. Since each person’s perception is filtered through their unique experiences and background, misunderstandings are common.

To communicate effectively, it’s essential not to pull others into our perception of reality but to step into theirs. Understanding how someone else sees the world allows us to bridge the gap between differing perceptions and foster more meaningful, empathetic interactions.
In conclusion, our perception is not reality, but it is our *reality*. It defines how we interact with the world, make decisions, and relate to others. Recognizing and respecting that everyone operates with a different version of reality is the first step to better communication and deeper understanding.

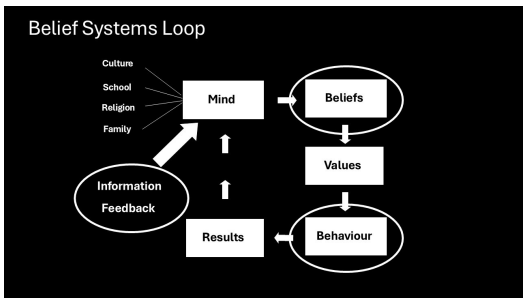


Belief Systems

The session explains the “belief-system loop”, a continuous cycle in which the way we think shapes our beliefs, those beliefs determine our values, values guide our behaviour, and behaviour generates results that in turn reinforce the original beliefs. We do not possess a single loop but many, each built from early influences—family, school, culture, religion, friends and experiences—most embedded by the age of seven. Because much of the process is unconscious, we often remain unaware of the beliefs driving us.

An example illustrates the mechanism: a child who repeatedly hears a parent complain that “managers are idiots” may absorb the belief that all managers are incompetent, rank “management” low in their value hierarchy and, as an adult employee, behave cynically or confrontationally toward supervisors. Predictably, this behaviour produces poor workplace results—missed promotions or dismissal—which the person then interprets as further proof that managers are indeed idiots, closing the self-confirming loop.

The lecture stresses that if you want different results, altering behaviour alone is rarely enough. New Year’s resolutions, for instance, rely on sustained conscious effort; once attention lapses, people revert to entrenched habits because their underlying values and beliefs remain unchanged. For lasting change, adjustments must occur at the subconscious level. Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) therefore holds that “all learning and change to be permanent has to take place in the unconscious.”



Beliefs can change, but only through the right kind of information reaching the unconscious. Two paths accomplish this. The first is a significant emotional event or trauma—whether negative (a spider crawling across a baby’s face leading to lifelong arachnophobia) or positive (a road-to-Damascus insight on a training course). The second is repetition: continuous exposure to a message or experience eventually re-codes belief. Repetition can be constructive, such as diligent practice, or destructive, such as a child who is constantly called “stupid” growing up convinced of their stupidity.

Because information about the consequences of behaviour is what we call feedback, feedback becomes the only reliable lever we have to influence someone else’s belief system—and our own.

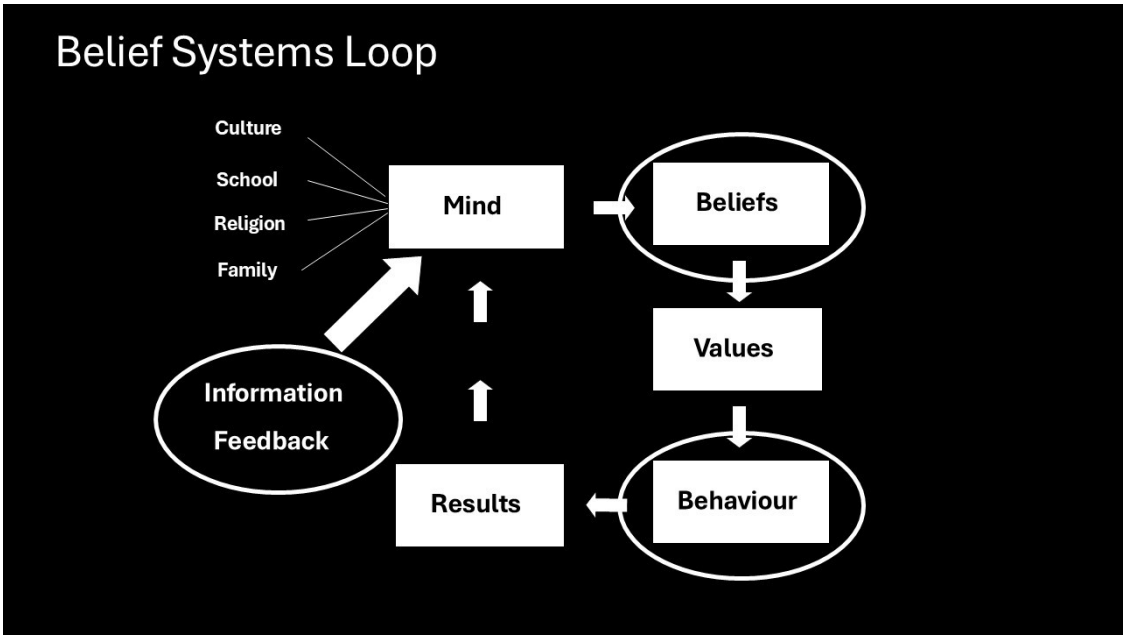
Belief Systems

Well-timed, non-judgemental feedback can puncture a faulty belief, as when a manager discovers through a leadership course that autocratic control is not the only effective style.

However, feedback is not guaranteed to work; entrenched beliefs sometimes twist evidence to fit, as in the anecdote of a psychiatric patient who insisted he was a corpse and, when shown that corpses do not bleed, simply adopted the new conviction that “corpses do bleed.”

Therefore, while deliberately adopting new behaviours can start the change process, meaningful, permanent transformation requires pairing practice with regular, reflective feedback that gradually reshapes belief.

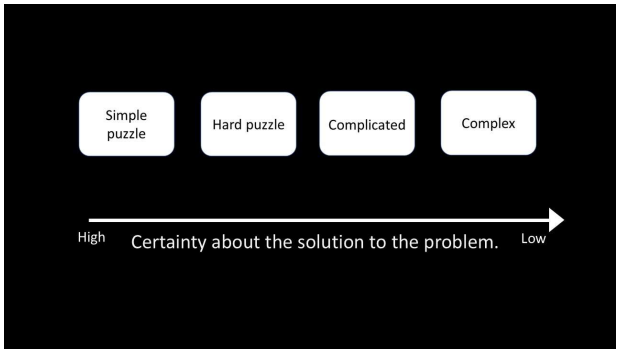
We recommend maintaining a learning log: record what you tried, the results you obtained and what you learned from them. By systematically feeding this information back to yourself, you stand a better chance of disrupting unhelpful loops, installing empowering beliefs—such as the conviction that people possess unlimited potential—and obtaining the results you truly want.



Complexity

The team's work often takes place in complicated and complex environments with varying outcomes. A pivotal insight came from a lecture by David Rooke, a renowned leadership expert, who helped clarify the difference between complicated and complex situations.
Rooke describes a continuum from high certainty to low certainty with four categories: simple puzzles, hard puzzles, complicated problems, and complex problems. Simple puzzles, like basic arithmetic, have clear answers. Hard puzzles, such as Sudoku, require learning but can be solved individually. Complicated problems require multiple skilled people working simultaneously—such as in a trauma call—where individual mastery alone is insufficient, and teamwork is critical. Importantly, in complicated scenarios, all participants aim for the same goal.

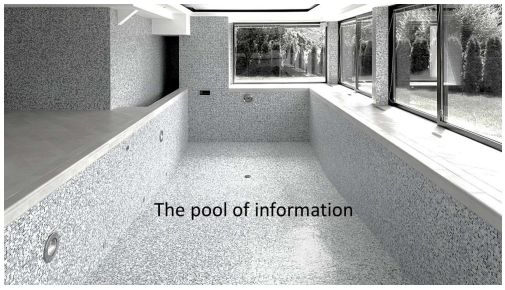
Complex problems differ because people may have conflicting goals and limited resources. Using the war in Syria as an example, Rooke illustrates how divergent desired outcomes create complexity. This mirrors many organizational settings where different teams pursue different objectives, sometimes unknowingly, leading to misunderstandings, frustration, and even hostility.
An example from healthcare at Mid Staffordshire hospital demonstrates this. Frontline staff focused on patient care, while executives prioritized financial viability. Both sides misunderstood each other's motives, resulting in conflict, suffering, and organizational failure. The root cause was the lack of communication and understanding about differing priorities and pressures faced by each group. Rooke stresses the importance of recognizing where results come from. Often, credibility is built on solving simple or hard puzzles alone, which is about personal mastery. However, as one advances, success increasingly depends on complicated and complex teamwork. Team mastery requires different skills, and these must be developed alongside personal mastery.



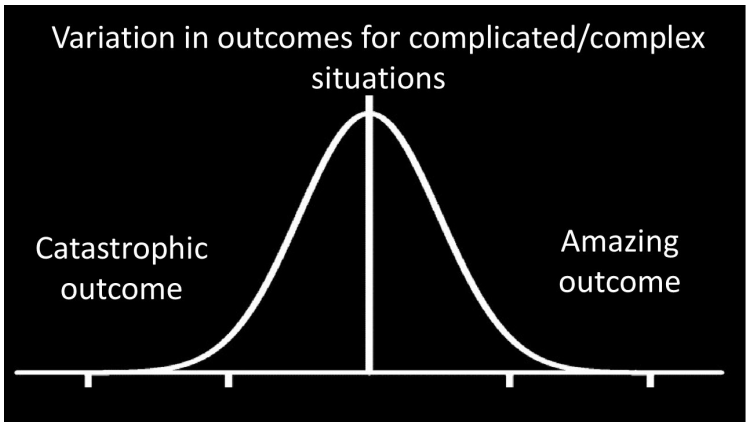
Complexity

This in turn highlights the challenge of perspective. For example, Chris and his wife Shuli approach problems differently due to their diverse backgrounds. Simply imagining others' viewpoints is limited because unconscious biases persist. Truly understanding others requires asking and listening, supported by psychological safety, so that diverse insights can emerge.
This brings in the "pool of information" model from Professor Jo Ann Gooey, illustrating how knowledge grows when people gather around a shared space of understanding. Inviting people with diverse backgrounds enriches this pool, while homogeneous groups tend to recycle the same information. McKinsey research shows that increasing diversity correlates with better business performance, including a rise in pre-tax profits.

However, diversity alone is insufficient without inclusivity. Each person controls their "tap" of information flow, which depends on feeling valued and respected. When people feel included, they share knowledge freely, improving decision-making.


The pool of information

This principle applies in clinical teams, where studies show that 40–60% of performance variation in resuscitations is due to information sharing. Civility—treating each other well—is the key factor that enables open communication. When respect is lacking, information flow shuts down, harming outcomes.
In conclusion, effective leadership in complicated and complex settings is about fostering inclusivity and psychological safety to encourage open information sharing. Leaders who can create environments where everyone's knowledge flows freely enable better decisions and improved results for teams and organizations.

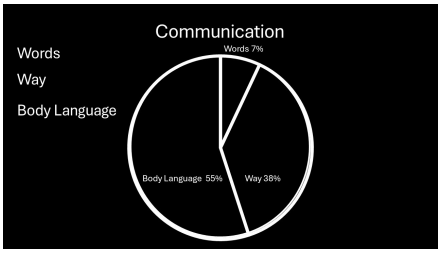


What's your theme tune?

What is your "theme tune"? It is the reputation that precedes each of us when we walk into a room. Other people "hear" this tune—often more loudly than the words we actually say—and it shapes how our messages are interpreted. This section unpacks how easily misunderstandings arise, how reputation amplifies or distorts them, and what leaders can do to ensure their intended tune is the one colleagues hear.

A real-life misunderstanding

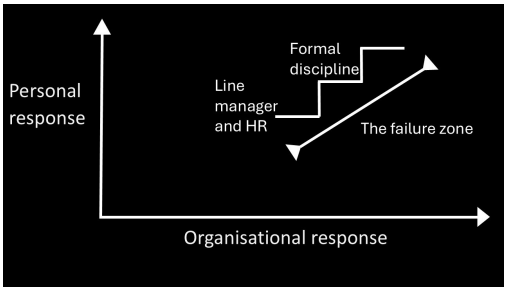
The catalyst is a story from the emergency department. A senior nurse, Becky, tells Chris that a registrar believes he called him "not a good doctor" who "can't run the shop floor." Bewildered—because he thinks highly of him—he realises he has been scheduled with him several times yet never actually crossed paths: he has been avoiding him. Determined to resolve the tension, he invites him for coffee and learns the source of the issue. a mere 6 %. Two forces explain the gap:



Real-time feedback. In conversation, puzzled expressions or clarifying questions cue us to adjust language instantly, maintaining high comprehension.
Asynchronous text. E-mail strips away tone, facial cues and body language; senders get no immediate feedback, so they project the same success rate they experience when speaking.

The three remaining cues in e-mail

When tone and movement disappear, comprehension depends on three elements:
Words on the screen (often ambiguous without vocal inflection),



The reader's current mood (people read in a mood-congruent way—positive mindsets interpret generously, negative mindsets critically),

The sender's reputation ("theme tune"). A respected colleague's curt line might read as efficient; a distrusted colleague's as aggressive.
Marius, is a long-time coworker of Chri's known for irreverent humour. He finds Marius's e-mails hilarious, but Marius insists they aren't jokes—proof that pre-existing expectations colour every sentence.

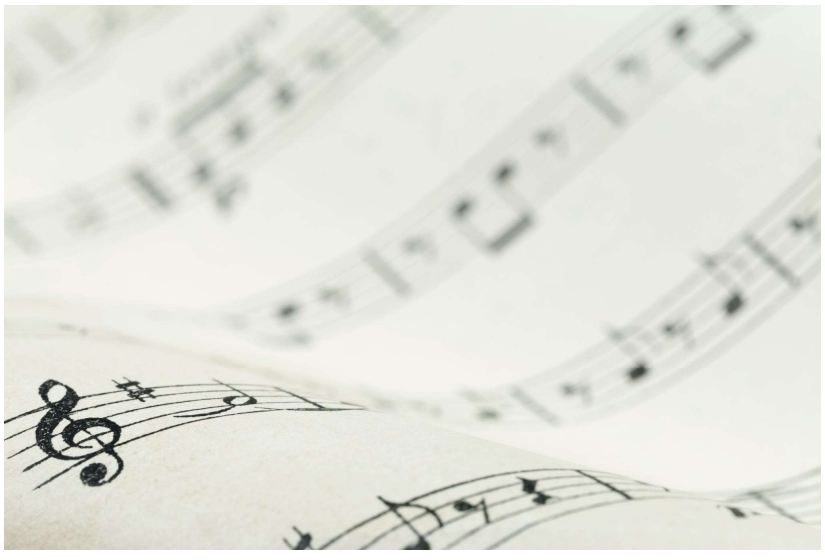
What's Your Theme Tune?

Leadership implications
Because reputation frames interpretation, leaders must:
Seek feedback on the tune others actually hear, not the one they assume they project. Without Becky's comment, the registrar's misconception would have persisted.

Clarify intent quickly when signs of avoidance or tension appear; early conversation prevents reputational damage.
Remember the e-mail handicap: write explicitly, assume little, invite questions, and consider picking up the phone when stakes are high.

Cultivate psychological safety so team members feel safe asking, "What did you mean by that?" rather than nursing silent resentment.

The closing challenge is personal: *What is your theme tune, what do you want it to be, and how must you behave—especially when writing—to ensure that's the music others hear?*



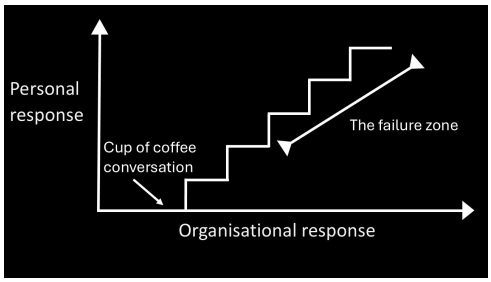
Benefits to the organisation

Research carried out in 2011 across 277 U.S. Veterans Affairs hospitals explored what happens at the organisational level when employees experience consistently high civility—that is, routine respect, courtesy and fair treatment. Facilities that landed at the top of the civility scale enjoyed a tightly linked web of advantages, while those at the bottom paid measurable costs.

1 Employee satisfaction and reputation
Staff in the most civil hospitals reported markedly higher job satisfaction. Satisfaction matters in itself, yet it also fuels a virtuous loop of positive word-of-mouth: proud employees talk up their employer, strengthening external reputation. When the organisation later stumbles, the public reaction is “That’s unusual for them” rather than “See, they really are awful,” giving civil workplaces reputational resilience.

2 Employee engagement and discretionary effort
Across industries, employee engagement is the single strongest predictor of performance, and it rose sharply with civility. Engaged workers not only look forward to work; they also volunteer “discretionary effort”—energy, ideas and problem-solving that go beyond the job description. This extra commitment translates into faster service, higher quality and better patient outcomes in a hospital context.

3 Employee retention and continuity
Civility significantly improved retention. Turnover is expensive: advertising, interview panels and onboarding drain funds, but the deeper cost is lost tacit knowledge and disrupted relationships. New hires often feel ineffective until they understand local systems and build trust with colleagues. High churn therefore hits continuity of care and loads extra mentoring duties onto those who stay, pushing morale down further. Keeping experienced people in place avoids those spirals.



4 Trust in management and openness to change
A civil environment fosters trust in leaders. When managers are trusted, new initiatives meet curiosity rather than resistance; in low-trust cultures, fresh ideas trigger the metaphorical screech of dug-in heels. Trust thus accelerates innovation and adaptation—crucial capabilities in healthcare.

Benefits to the organisation

5 Hard-currency savings

The cultural benefits above translated into striking financial gains. Hospitals in the top civility tier spent about US $2.2 million less per year on Equal Employment Opportunity lawsuits than those in the bottom tier. Far larger were savings on sickness absence: civil organisations saved roughly US $26.2 million annually. Two mechanisms explain the gap. First, chronically uncivil workplaces create chronic stress; elevated cortisol weakens immunity, so genuine illness rises. Second, a hostile climate dampens motivation: employees who wake slightly unwell are likelier to “hide under the duvet” and phone in sick. In a supportive culture they will often shower, reassess and still report for duty because they expect to be treated well.

Conclusion: behaviour as strategic infrastructure

Everyday interpersonal behaviour is not a soft side-issue; it is strategic infrastructure. Civility amplifies satisfaction, engagement, retention and trust—four human factors tied directly to quality, safety and adaptability—while unlocking multimillion-dollar savings through reduced litigation and absenteeism. Conversely, incivility imposes hidden taxes via turnover, reputational damage, compliance costs and avoidable sickness.

For organisational leaders the implication is clear: investing in respectful norms—through role-modelling, training, accountability and recognition—delivers one of the highest returns available. A civil culture fortifies the balance sheet, frees employees to perform at their peak and ultimately determines how well the entire institution can achieve its mission.