

## Why Does Civility Matter?

**Brief:** To be able to present strong opinions in a civil way, we need to go beyond arguing about who has the “right” perspective by transcending our cultural bias.

**Learning Objective:** Define "civility" and understand how to overcome cultural bias.

**Key Terms:**

- **Civility:** The act of behaving in ways that support good citizenship.
- **Cultural Bias:** The process of interpreting and judging others by standards inherent to one's own cultural experience.

### What is Civility?

The word “civility” has its roots in early Western culture. It dates back to the Latin word “civilis,” which means “relating to citizens.” In early use, the term referred to the state of being a citizen and became associated with good citizenship or orderly behavior. The associated meaning of “politeness” arose in the mid-16th century.

Incivility is the polar opposite of civility— a lack of, or to be completely without, civility. Verbal or physical attacks on others, cyber bullying, rudeness, religious intolerance, discrimination, and vandalism are behaviors that are generally considered acts of incivility.

### *Civility in America*

In a 2018 report, “Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey,” researchers found that Americans report a severe civility deficit, with a vast majority – 93% – identifying a civility problem in society, and most classifying it as a major problem (69%). Surprisingly, the same study revealed that most people consider their workplace a civility safe zone. More than nine in 10 Americans who work with others (92%) describe their place of employment as very or somewhat civil, a statistic that marks a significant increase since a previous study conducted at the end of 2016 (86%).

Why is civility so much better in the workplace than in everyday life? “Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey” suggests the answer lies in what people don’t do at work. The majority of Americans (81%) agree that highly controversial subjects can be discussed in a civil way. But approximately three in 10 Americans with coworkers (31%) say they avoid discussing sensitive topics in the workplace for fear that the conversation will turn uncivil.



*For many, the Statue of Liberty represents the ideal values of a civil society.*

## **Presenting Sensitive Topics in a Civil Way**

Public speakers often choose to speak on sensitive topics. In fact, the National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication asserts public speakers have an ethical obligation to address such topics: "We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society."

To be able to present strong opinions in a civil way, we need to go beyond arguing about who has the "right" perspective and find common ground. We need to transcend our cultural bias, the process by which we interpret and judge others by standards inherent to our own cultural experience.

### ***Overcoming Cultural Bias***

Cultural bias exists in two forms when speaking in public. There's the cultural bias you bring to the podium. And, there's the cultural bias that exists in the minds of your audience. Both can impact your speech.

These biases can affect the ways your audience receives you as a speaker, in both trustworthiness and reliability as a subject expert. Additionally, your cultural bias may impact your mannerisms and speaking patterns as you deliver your speech.

Your cultural bias may also impact the strength and comprehensiveness of your argument. If your cultural bias only allows you to see things in a certain cultural context, there may be parts of your argument that aren't fully developed simply because you don't have the cultural context to even realize that part of your argument is not fully formed.

To overcome cultural bias, take a step back from your speech. Consider the following questions:

What cultural context does your audience bring to your speech?

What is the race, ethnicity, nationality, and heritage of your audience?

What language barriers may exist?

What cultural context do you bring to the table?

What cultural biases might your audience have about you as speaker?

What is the cultural context of both your argument and supporting evidence?

## From Concept to Action

While you might not think of yourself as someone who has to overcome cultural bias, we all grow up in particular cultural contexts that influence our perspectives. Our cultural experience inherently makes us biased against dissimilar cultural experiences to our own. What cultural context do you bring to the table? How can you reduce your bias against those with dissimilar cultural experiences?

### OER IMAGE SOURCES:

"Statue of Liberty." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/en/statue-of-liberty-liberty-usa-992552/>. Accessed 16 November 2018. [Creative Commons CC0 License]

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