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BUZZWORDS

Thoughts on SUIQ from

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What does it cost to practice civility in our lives? What do we sacrifice when we respond politely to a question, give our full attention to someone with a problem, or let someone ahead in line?

If you go by what passes for human interaction these days, the price is evidently too high. You know that if you wait at a store counter while the clerk finishes a personal phone call in front of you or if you get the distinct impression that your requests are inconveniencing the "customer service" representative. You know it when you get cut off in traffic or when your enjoyment of a movie is ruined by loud conversations taking place behind you in the theater.

The problem is exacerbated, in my mind, by the "entertainment" available in the media. Talk shows feature physical confrontation at worst and outright rudeness at best. Even on such established programs as the Today Show, guests talk over each other and the interviewer, shedding no light on the subject at hand. And sit-coms offer sarcasm and put-downs as the main sources of humor.

Admittedly, the subject of civility is getting some ink these days. But it's easy to talk about the lack of courtesy in everyday life. Who doesn't support politeness, good manners, and tact?

Syracuse University is fortunate to have a staff and faculty that practices the art of civility daily. The great majority of the people here are polite by nature and have demonstrated again and again a commitment to students and to each other that is above and beyond the call of duty. Very often this commitment plays out under great stress, a sign of genuine courtesy.

I don't mean to imply that civility can take place

only in the absence of conflict. Conflict is an inevitable and even welcome part of life of any university since it is a critical catalyst for learning and growth. Nevertheless, exercising respect for another's views even while disagreeing is the soul of civil behavior.

Neither do I mean we must accept abusive behavior from others or sit quietly in the face of socially destructive attitudes such as racism and sexism. This is a community united in the search for truths, and we are duty bound to expose ideas that have no basis in fact.

The SUIQ training program is intertwined with lessons in civility. The assertiveness, active listening, and encouragement of creative thinking taught as essential group skills are really just excellent workplace etiquette. When we can present our ideas without intimidating others, work toward better understanding, and support each other's ideas for improving the work we do together, we are being civil in the best possible way.

There's another word that comes to mind: respect. That means seeing value in every person with whom we interact and respecting that value with our words and actions. Thus we can accept another's perspective even while holding a contradictory idea.

There are some solid, practical reasons for increasing the civility factor on campus. First, behaving respectfully to one another goes a long way toward reducing unnecessary stress and strain in the work day. Second, by practicing good workplace manners, we demonstrate to students that the escalation of disrespect out in the world today isn't the norm for educated people.

Finally, civility is an essential ingredient in our core values of quality, diversity, innovation, service, and caring — especially the last.

On Civility