



EXTENSION

College of Agriculture,
Biotechnology & Natural Resources

PEER
REVIEWED

FS-23-24

Use Your Emotional Intelligence to Reclaim Civility

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Civility is defined as demonstrating and maintaining respectful behavior toward one another, even when we disagree (NICD, 2022). Essentially, Civility is how we treat each other with respect **especially when we disagree**. In the Annual Civic Literacy Assessment conducted by the American Bar Association (2023), over 85% of respondents indicated civility in our communities has declined. The reasons cited for the downward spiral included social media (29%), media in general (24%), and public officials (19%) (ABA 2023).

Likewise, The Pew Research Center (2022), found social media as a key cause of rising incivility among how individuals engage in and discuss politics. Social media offers both positive and negative changes in how we as a society interact (Pew, 2022). Many people have a desire to reverse the growing trend of incivility, both in our personal interactions, and within our social media experiences. While many of us recognize and experience the lack of civility, we often are unsure of how to restore civility. What can one person do?

Being civil towards others does not equate to agreement, but rather requires respect for someone with whom we disagree. Civility is a component of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage one's emotions, and recognize and respond effectively to others (Goleman, 1995). Emotional Intelligence requires one to have **awareness/recognition** of one's self, and in the company of others, as well as the **ability to regulate/control** oneself, and in the company of others. Civility only comes into play when we disagree with others and treating others with respect when we do disagree. This short fact sheet will discuss why civility is important for communities and how to apply tips from emotional intelligence to help reclaim civility in our communities.

Why Civility?

Civility is far more than politeness. Civility is a cornerstone of democracy. It provides an opportunity for diverse groups of people to develop a deeper understanding of one another's values, opinions, perspectives and ideas for potential solutions (NICD, 2022). Communities cannot avoid tough issues because they are unpleasant or complicated (Burgess and Burgess, 2019). Civil discourse, the thoughtful and respective exchange of ideas through conversation, is critical to finding effective solutions for the issues

facing our communities (NCDD, 2010). Without civility and the practice of civil discourse, the general public and our elected officials fail in meeting our roles and responsibilities of governance, and we fail in our role as responsible citizens (Lafont, 2022).

Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman (1995, 2002) outlined four domains of Emotional Intelligence. The four domains are in a quadrant and include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Figure 1). Each domain lists specific competencies within the quadrant (Figure 1). **Self-Awareness** is one's ability to recognize their emotions and how it may impact others. The more a person is aware of their feelings and how those feelings are being displayed and impacting others, the better one is able to manage and determine how to respond to others (Goleman 2002). **Self-Management** is one's ability to manage their thoughts, actions, speech, and feelings. While no one can constantly manage their emotions, one can build the practice to regulate when emotions are interrupting our clarity on the task or discussion, to allow us to apply some strategies before responding to negative emotions. **Social Awareness** is the ability to notice the emotions of others, take their perspective into account, and use our capacity for empathy and understanding. **Relationship Management** is the ability to take one's personal emotions, the emotions of others, and the context of discussion or issue at hand, and manage the interaction of the relationship given the task. Relationship management is dealing with conflict and involves listening and collaborative efforts (Goleman, 2002).

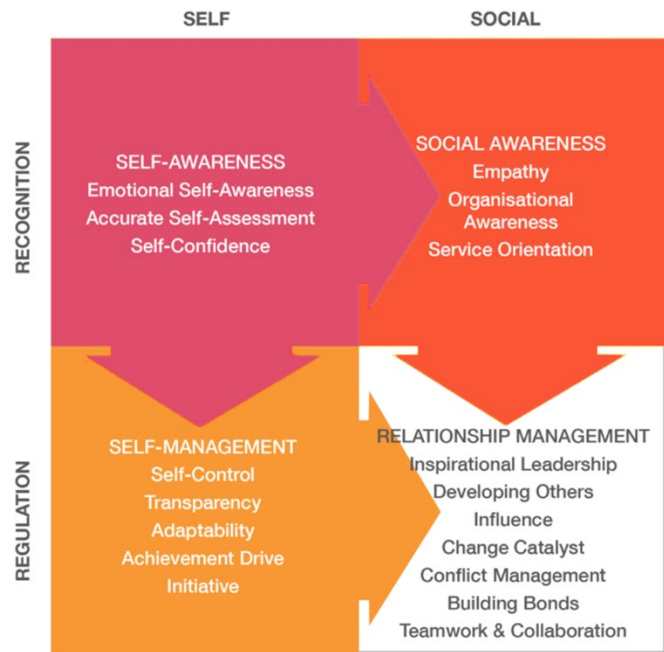


Figure 1. Goleman's Model of Emotional Intelligence

Now that emotional intelligence has been briefly discussed, the real question remains: How does one put their emotional intelligence into action to help reclaim civility in our communities? Below are some simple tips and strategies to apply one's emotional intelligence for civility.

Strategies for Improving Civility Through Emotional Intelligence

Self-Awareness Strategies:

- **Be Mindful of Your Own Behavior.** Notice how you are reacting and responding when others speak. How are your words, silence, or body language impacting others? Are you asking clarifying questions? Are you paying attention to others when they speak? Do not dominate the conversation. When engaging online, treat

people with kindness and compassion. Pause before you post or reply through social media.

- **Don't Interrupt or Talk Over Others.** Even if you are excited or have something important to contribute, you will have your time to speak. Allow others their time to speak without interruptions.
- **Respect Differences.** Respect other's differences both when in person and online. Engage thoughtfully and avoid name-calling and personal attacks. It is easy, but cowardly to post online personal attacks. Online attacks have no personal accountability, serve no purpose and almost never change another's opinion. Refrain from such online posts and learn to respect differences, especially when you disagree.

Self-Management Strategies:

- **Do Not Engage in Side Conversations.** Side conversations are disrespectful and a distraction for both the person speaking and those who are trying to listen.
- **Actively Listen for Content.** While someone else is speaking, listen to understand their point, especially if you think you disagree. Don't formulate your rebuttal...but listen to understand. What is the speaker trying to communicate? The person may not express their points concisely. Write down clarifying questions if needed for when your time to speak comes up.
- **Pause Before Replying.** Pause and think before responding to something you do not agree with. Do not post or send anything that could hurt someone or damage their reputation.
- **Model Civil Behavior and Speech.** Model the behavior you want and expect from others. Civility is demonstrated through a person's action, attitude, and speech. When we model civility, it helps others to understand what civility looks like and how it is put into practice, especially when we disagree with someone.

Social Awareness Strategies:

- **Show Respect for Others and Yourself.** Do not make demeaning or inappropriate comments, personal attacks, facial expressions, or gestures. Maintain professional, respectful composure. It is very hard when we disagree with others to remain composed, but showing respect when we disagree lies at the heart of civility.
- **Seek Common Ground.** As you listen actively to others, where do you see areas of agreement? Identify and call attention to areas of agreement when it is your turn to speak.
- **Ask Clarifying Questions.** Don't assume you understand what another person means. Ask clarifying questions to help you understand perspectives different from your own.
- **Differentiate Between FACTS and OPINIONS.** Both facts and opinions are valid and important when expressed appropriately. It is important to know the difference between what the evidence is and what is one's opinion. While we will never have all the information possible, we must use the best available information supported by evidence to make an informed decision.

Relationship Management Strategies:

- **Separate People from the Problem.** Residents of a community will have different views and opinions on how best to address complex problems. Don't attack people or their ideas, but rather focus on the problem itself. Separate the person from the problem and don't blame the messenger. Avoid the "us-versus-them" language and reframe the discussion back on the problem and not in attacking the person. As Fisher and Ury (1991) state, be "soft" on the people but "hard" on the problem.
- **Gather the Best Available Facts.** Many public problems involve disagreements about facts/data, or people confuse opinions with facts. A fact is something that can be verified with evidence. An opinion is a belief or judgement about something. Explain the reasoning and evidence to support or not support a proposal based on information and evidence gathered.
- **Stand up for Yourself and Others.** Tell someone if you feel unsafe, either from a social media post or an in-person exchange. Offer support to those who are targets online. Reach out to those who can listen. Report social media activity that may threaten anyone's safety.
- **Limit Interpersonal Misunderstandings.** Resist the temptation to focus only on information that makes your ideas look good and others look bad. Make an honest and continuing effort to understand the views and reasoning of the other side. Clarify your own interests to avoid misunderstandings.
- **Apply Reframing and Questioning.** One may need to reframe the discussion back onto the problem and focus on the interests, not the position (Fisher and Ury, 1991). A position is what a person has decided is the solution to an issue; an interest is what caused the person to decide on the position. By asking questions and reframing back on to the problem, you can better understand the interests of a person and hence find more room for common ground.

Conclusion

Taking individual action to start reclaiming civility in our communities is not an easy task. However, to be resigned and accept our declining civility is to surrender a key cornerstone of our democratic process. If we forego public deliberation and engaging in discussions with whom we disagree, both in-person and online, that only "*erodes the fundamental commitment of the democratic ideal of self-government*" (Lafont, 2022 p.10).

Community has always been recognized as the laboratory of democracy, for it is in our communities where individuals gain the opportunity to learn and practice democratic governance (Dewey, 1927). Our communities and our residents will become stronger and more resilient if we take steps toward reclaiming our civility by using our emotional intelligence.

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