

Civility, Respect and Engagement at the Workplace (CREW): A National Organization Development Program at the Department of Veterans Affairs

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Abstract

This paper is written for individuals and organizations interested in systematically supporting the climate of civility, respect and engagement within their workplaces. We discuss an organization development program called Civility, Respect and Engagement at the Workplace (CREW), conducted at the national scale within the second largest government agency within the U.S.: the Department of Veterans Affairs. The program is based on a process-focused, client-centered approach to organizational change (Reddy, 1994; Schein, 2006), with the intent of improving group members' experience of their shared work environment. CREW facilitators support the group members' dialogue about the meaning of civility within their particular group and about their personal interpretations of each other's behaviors as civil or not. CREW proceeds for at least 6 months, using trained facilitators and a variety of supporting materials and activities from the centrally maintained toolkit that is freely shared by the designers of the program. CREW has been empirically demonstrated to improve civility in participating workgroups within and outside of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Levels of civility in general and participation in CREW specifically have been connected to positive outcomes for employees and organizations in prior research. This paper overviews the operating principles of CREW, describes the process of conducting the program and briefly summarizes the results available thus far. We offer enough detail to allow individuals and organizations to evaluate how this approach may benefit them and we share suggestions on where to start if there is interest in implementing the program.

Keywords: Civility, Respect and Engagement at the Workplace (CREW): a National Organization Development Program at the Department of Veterans Affairs

Why is Workplace Civility Important?

The importance of positive psychological climate and in particular, of civility has an intuitive appeal, perhaps reflecting one of the basic tenets that we all learned in our early socialization training. Respect and “love of thy neighbor”—the concepts closely related to the definition of civility (Anderson & Pearson, 1999)—have been valued in various cultures for centuries. Taking a positive climate to the workplace, an environment where most adults spend most of their waking life, is of obvious value as well; moreover, psychological benefits of such applications to individuals and pragmatic (e.g. monetary) benefits to organizations have been empirically documented (e.g. Benzer et al., 2002; Garman, Corrigan, & Morris, 2002; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). However, the programmatic aspects of supporting the positive culture within organizations—i.e. those aspects that involve systematic application and evaluation of these concepts to the organizational life—have lagged behind. In fact, benefits of civility at the workplace have only recently come to attention of researchers, consultants and the general public. Little information is available about specific processes promoting positive workplace climate; evaluation data are even more scarce. Whereas much has been written about the negative impact of incivility and its costs to organizations (see, e.g., Anderson & Pearson, 1999 for a review), much less is known about how to create and maintain civil environments.

What is CREW?

This paper shares the authors’ experience of successfully conducting an organizational initiative that has been specifically designed, tested and proven to promote workplace civility. This program is Civility, Respect and Engagement at the Workplace (CREW), which began in 2005 at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)—the second largest federal organization in the U.S.A. which employs over 310 thousand employees providing healthcare and other services to approximately 5 million Veterans nationwide.

CREW resulted from the top VA leaders’ commitment to enhancing the organizational culture of everyday interactions at work. Recognizing this need reflected a growing understanding within VA (e.g. Young, 2000) and, broader, within the U.S. government sector (e.g. United States Postal Service Commission, 2000) that civility is a crucial part of the organizational climate as perceived by employees. Civility therefore is a major determinant not only of individual employee outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction, stress levels) but also of higher level outcomes directly connected to the organizational mission (e.g., quality of patient care, operational costs, ability to retain quality workforce, and more). VA leaders reviewed several internal studies (see Osatuke et al., 2009 for more details), which all suggested that civility, or how we treat one another within the organization, was an area needing attention. This prompted a pilot of a new initiative to support a culture of civil and respectful interactions on the job.

CREW within VA is conducted by the National Center for Organization Development (NCOD), an internal consultant office within the largest healthcare system at the U.S.A.: the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), which is part of VA.NCOD took a major role in designing the CREW program, implemented it in VHA, documented its success based on outcome data, and shared the methods and practices with interested organizations and consultants outside of the VHA and VA. This resulted in expanding CREW to several government and private sector organizations, including healthcare and other industries in the U.S.A. and abroad. The last five years in particular brought a considerable expansion of CREW. The program has become more widely known due to its steadily increasing participation rates, the accumulating experience with implementation, and several publications in popular and scientific journals that have summarized the success of CREW groups compared to control groups within and outside of the U.S.A. (e.g. Osatuke et al., 2009; Leiter et al., 2011, 2012).

Why is a Systematic Approach to Workplace Civility Needed?

Research on workplace civility and incivility has expanded over the previous years, as the quality of day-to-day social exchanges among employees has been established as a determinant of employees' distress or engagement with their work and multiple related outcomes (e.g. Harter & Schmidt, 2002). Like others (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999), we understand civil and uncivil interactions on the job as more than separate instances taking place between individuals but rather, as manifestations of interactional patterns situated within a larger context—most immediately, in the context of the workplace.

Longitudinal surveys of employees have found that patterns of civility or of incivility tend to persist within organizations; moreover, mildly negative social encounters often evolve into more severe social mistreatment (AKA incivility spirals; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Of note, much of incivility reflects ambiguous intent on the part of perpetrators; a person's social behavior may offend or irritate coworkers despite no intentions from that individual to have such effect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Leiter, 2012). In addition, while behaviors that convey "love thy neighbor" are generally universally praised and valued in any social environments, even when there is shared understanding of what is respectful, consistently acting respectfully may be more difficult when we are presented with many competing and occasionally stressful demands on our time and attention. This level of demands accurately describes many contemporary workplaces.

The CREW program consciously cultivates awareness of one's interpersonal impact on the job. This reflects an expectation that the organization holds of its employees to pay attention to their own interactional style, notice and check how other people receive interpersonal behavior and modify it if necessary (e.g., if it leads to unintended interpersonal outcomes). The CREW model thus casts civil behaviors as impersonal (part of the organizational norms), and therefore not limited to only those people whom one knows. For example, a greeting "hello" in the office is understood as a civil, rather than personally expressive behavior. This reframes civility from something based on personal attitudes and offered as contingent upon personal relationships, to a standard that needs to be met on behalf of the organization as organizational members come into contact with each other and with the customers. While the contents of civil behaviors are specific to different workplaces (civil interactions between nurses in a rural clinic and civil interactions between attorneys in a congressional office in Washington, D.C. likely look different), we have found that adopting the agreed upon civil behaviors as a norm of being at the workplace universally and dramatically increases satisfaction with coworkers and with the interpersonal climate on the job. This change in climate is often contagious in the most positive sense within the organization, likely causing a "civility spiral" (Leiter et al., 2011; Osatuke et al., 2009).

The CREW Model

The importance of positive interpersonal environment concepts in the life of workers and organizations has been long recognized in general and organizational psychology (e.g. Adlerfer, 1972; Argyris, 1964; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Likert, 1961; Maslow, 1973; Rogers, 1977). Nevertheless, as the review of current literature in the process of developing the CREW program showed, most of the existing research and organizational interventions center on how to decrease incivility and its known antecedents and outcomes which include disruptive behaviors, stress, aggression, and lack of interpersonal justice. In the CREW approach, a deliberate decision was made to focus on civility—a decision influenced by the Appreciative Inquiry framework (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003) and more generally, by insights from the field of positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Similar to these models, CREW emphasizes positive outcomes achieved by looking for what is already working, building upon already existing strengths and assets, and defining change in terms of what is wanted (rather than what is not wanted).

CREW interventions are based on first identifying, then recreating successful, satisfying work experiences, building on teams' strengths, and finding opportunities for improvement. This is an overarching philosophy for CREW workplace interventions. Additional concepts from various models and theories (e.g., the value of empathic listening—Rogers, 1977; see Osatuke et al., in press, for more examples) are also incorporated in CREW as potentially useful tools and heuristics for elaborating more specific aspects of workplace interactions, relevant for the program's focus on promoting civility. These concepts serve as additional language to help articulate and explain CREW approach to groups that use it and name some of the interactional dynamics that CREW addresses.

CREW aims at raising awareness of the importance of civility and respect on the job. At the beginning of each intervention, this overarching purpose translates into opening a discussion with group members regarding a business case for civility, i.e. talking about how a civil climate would help accomplish work tasks and performance goals for this specific workgroup. Participants also discuss and ultimately define what constitutes a respectful workplace in their particular unit, and come to an agreement on which obstacles, including bad habits, get in the way. The shared understandings that emerge from these discussions enable the group participants to set their common goals with respect to civility norms at their workplace. As CREW progresses, the group then focuses on continuing to be aware of the interpersonal climate within the unit and consciously monitor levels of respect and civility. It is important to collectively recognize and make a point of showing appreciation for those behaviors which, in the group members' agreement, improve their workplace climate. Recognizing and rewarding such behaviors is a focus of many CREW activities that take place in the mid-process of the program. Connecting the civility norms to other values, priorities, and aspects of work and culture within the organization is also important. Drawing these links stays within focus of attention throughout the program, as civility norms become more articulated and applied to additional areas of work life within the participating group. Groups also highlight and celebrate positive outcomes of their improved climate—for example, by publicly acknowledging specific instances when coworkers' interpersonal support made a difference, or took an edge off a challenging task (see Osatuke et al., in press, for more detailed descriptions of CREW group process).

Of note, the specific content of civil workplace behaviors is neverdefined in universally applicable ways within the CREW model; instead, it is defined locally, on a case-per-case basis, as civil behaviors are culturally specific to each workplace. Organization development scholars describe civility and incivility as unique to particular situations (e.g., Pearson et al, 2005). Variability in interpreting what constitutes civil behaviors in CREW is intentional, as it is conceptually driven; a standard definition is not only impossible but also not desirable. The variability of contents that define “civility” for participant groups reflects the reality of different values, goals, work contents, group memberships, demographics, and multiple other aspects that together contribute to vastly different interpersonal climates within organizations and units (including different units within the same organizations participating in CREW). This distinction between civility norms and their expression through specific civil behaviors is crucial for understanding the CREW model. The difference is analogous to that between a construct (e.g. “positive reinforcement”) and a way to operationalize it (e.g. “offering a candy bar”). The model defines the former, whereas group participants define the latter.

How the CREW Program Works at the VA

Any organization within the VA (and outside) can contact NCOD to obtain information on the CREW initiative. Marketing materials for the program include an informational PowerPoint presentation, brochures, an FAQ sheet, and a promotional DVD. Once a VA organization has determined its interest in the program, it must appoint a local CREW coordinator while NCOD assigns its staff member (“companion”) for the site.

A “readiness call” is then scheduled that includes the CEO and the union leader(s) from the interested organization, the newly appointed CREW coordinator, an NCOD CREW senior staff member, and the NCOD companion. The readiness call is not be conducted unless these leaders attend, because their support is critical to success of CREW at VA (and we believe, at any) organizations. The call presents an opportunity to answer any questions and establish a working relationship between the site and NCOD. Once all questions have been answered and there is consensus that the site is ready, all parties on the call review and sign the site agreement that lists the support that NCOD will provide to the site and guidelines for best practices based on previous experiences with CREW implementation.

Once an organization is enrolled in CREW, the CREW coordinator and two or three trained facilitators who will run the program in participating workgroups begin planning how to promote the initiative at their site, how to choose appropriate workgroups, and market the civility concepts to share with employees the benefits of the program and opportunities for participation. Promotional events may explain CREW to the entire organization, e.g. by holding an open conference within the main auditorium of a participating medical center, often in the format of an open fair with promotional materials, snacks and civility-related games and activities. We have found it best when new sites start with just one or two carefully selected workgroups and complete their CREW process (typically within six months) before engaging more groups. This affords the participating groups the time to gain some experience with the process, evaluate their initial efforts and modify any processes if they choose. Throughout this process, local staff members implementing CREW maintain regular, frequent contact with NCOD for intensive support and guidance.

Once a list of potentially participating workgroups is generated, the coordinator approaches each group’s supervisor to discuss the possibility of offering CREW to their employees. If the supervisor agrees and the workgroup elects to participate, the NCOD companion creates the pre-intervention survey link that the facilitators then send to the workgroup members, inviting them to rate workplace civility. When the survey closes, the NCOD companion creates a summary chart that helps start a discussion at the first CREW meeting. Workgroups typically meet two to four times per month, usually no more than an hour each time; this process lasts for approximately six months.

NCOD holds a monthly national conference call for CREW coordinators and facilitators, to offer them with opportunities to network, share best practices and creative ideas, consult and strategize. A SharePoint dedicated to CREW comprises an extensive toolkit of materials and activities that can be used, at the facilitators’ discretion, to structure discussions about civility during group meetings. These materials are updated monthly and available to all local coordinators and facilitators through a link on the VA intranet website. The most important support, however, comes from NCOD staff members assigned to each site: the companions (term that emphasizes a relational and collaborative spirit of the initiative).

Companions have frequent phone and email contact with CREW coordinators and facilitators, provide guidance and encouragement, share best practices, help with marketing and promotion of CREW, advise on facilitators’ and work groups’ selection, and assist with obtaining resources in SharePoint and in other formats that fit the site’s needs. Companions also provide the national comparison data from VA and assist in collecting data from participating workgroups (e.g. surveys of employee perceptions of civility in their group). Facilitators then use these data to present pre/post intervention results to their workgroups. Each companion also works closely with local organizational leaders (e.g. medical center directors) to support the intervention process at these organizations. Overall, the companions offer each site a connection to the VA CREW community nationwide.

A careful selection of CREW facilitators is important for the program’s success. NCOD provides training to CREW coordinators and facilitators several times per year.

Beginning level materials for those completely new to the initiative and to group facilitation explain the CREW philosophy, the business case for civility, a connection of CREW to other initiatives at the VA, and roles and responsibilities of all parties (e.g. participants, supervisors, facilitators). The training offers basic facilitation skills needed to lead, guide and coach conversations about civility within workgroups. Attendees also practice these skills during the typically two day training. More advanced materials are offered for those who have completed the basic training.

An intervention that promotes a change in the workplace culture needs to earn a good reputation and gain momentum within the organization, which happens if workgroups feel fortunate for a chance to participate. Motivated workgroups begin CREW and typically reach some demonstrated success, whether shown statistically (comparisons of pre- to post-ratings of civility) or anecdotally (stories about the program exchanged between employees at the facility). After a few workgroups have gone through the CREW process successfully, it is common for other units' supervisors to begin asking that their areas be included as well. As CREW participation expands, its impact on the organization is better understood, and often used for marketing, which results in more groups joining the program. At sites that already have workgroups enrolled in CREW, further marketing includes sharing testimonials of participants and having the CREW coordinator and employees from participating groups come and share their experience at staff meetings of units that consider joining CREW.

The Operating Principles of CREW

The mechanism of change that theoretically explains positive change during CREW interventions is that, for the intervention period, organizations commit to giving time, attention, and support to regular conversations between coworkers about civility at their specific workplaces. These dialogues allow bringing on the job interactions to the collective awareness of the group and create room for considering them together, in the shared interpersonal context of the group's work-life, thus creating regular opportunities for reflection and better understanding. More interpersonal awareness and better understanding within the workgroup are intermediate outcomes of CREW, thus prerequisite to the following process as coworkers identify specific issues that shape interpersonal climate in their group, give these issues collective attention, arrive to shared understandings, formulate which actions would help, and plan how to take these actions. Organizational support given to the civility aspects of working life (i.e. the granted time, attention, and permission to fully explore the topic) thus creates conditions that enable the workgroups to find an optimal focus and process for their specific unit that establishes and maintains a positive workplace environment. This understanding of what causes change reflects the humanistic psychology roots of the organization development and specifically of the CREW model. (See Osatuke et al., 2012, for a detailed discussion of mechanisms of change in CREW).

The challenge for the program that promotes civility is to interrupt the existing pattern of uncivil interactions, replacing problematic social encounters with civil exchanges. The strategy used by CREW to accomplish this purpose follows the following principles (Leiter, 2012; Osatuke et al, 2009):

1. Behavioral: CREW builds on the proposition that changing behavior will lead to changes in attitudes and emotions. This expectation is based on a long-standing conceptual and empirical tradition in psychology (e.g. James, 1878/1984; Vygotsky, 1924/78; and others). For example, Vygotsky's activity theory and related research convincingly demonstrated that guided changes in simple behaviors can directly promote an evolution in thinking and a growing capacity to use more advanced and efficient strategies for problem-solving, particularly in interpersonal contexts.

2. Participatory: The CREW approach minimizes didactic activities while emphasizing discussion, role plays, and action plans. In other words, CREW does not represent a package of information that needs to be consumed (i.e. learned, memorized) by participants. Instead, CREW is an experientially based program.

It requires that the conversations about civility occur within the context of interpersonal involvement, and take place within the specific relevant setting (i.e. engaging with one's coworkers, at one's workplace). Much like meditation or physical activity, CREW cannot be simply talked about or read about; in order for the effects to take place, it has to be directly experienced by the participants. A correlate of this is that it takes at least 6 months of exposure to the program in order to realize its full benefits to participating workgroups.

3. Customized: Rather than impose ideal principles of civility to which every workgroup should aspire, CREW actively encourages each workgroup to explore and define its own principles of civility and incivility. This reflects an understanding of civility as a intrinsically connected to the local culture of a specific workplace.

4. Structured: CREW does not encourage groups to do what comes naturally, assuming that doing so is what perpetuates their problems. In contrast, CREW draws upon a toolkit of structured exercises, discussion points, and facilitation points to promote a more civil manner of interaction among members. The contents of the toolkit that contains the CREW program support materials are described in more detail in Osatuke et al. (2009).

How Do We Know that CREW Works?

The first test of CREW contrasted participating VHA intervention groups with matched controls and found a striking improvement in civility for the CREW groups while the control groups' civility score remained constant for the 12 month period (Osatuke et al, 2009). A study in Canadian hospitals replicated the improvement in civility and demonstrated that this change mediated additional improvements in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, management trust, and job burnout aspects (Leiter et al, 2010). The improvements were sustained one year post-intervention, whereas control groups remained unchanged throughout the study period (Leiter et al, 2011).

The differences were striking. For example, job satisfaction improved 9.21% for the CREW groups while changing only 0.59% for controls (Leiter et al, 2010). Similarly, trust in management improved 4.42% for the CREW groups while changing only 0.59% for controls. Leiter et al (2011) found that most constructs remained improved one year later and some even continued to improve after the intervention was over.

At the time of this writing, CREW has been implemented at 109 locations and positively affected the working life of approximately 1100 workgroups, located primarily within Veterans Healthcare organizations. The Joint Commission (TJC), a nonprofit independent accrediting body for United States health care agencies, has recently recognized CREW as a national best practice in employee safety and well-being—an endorsement which speaks to the significant impact of the CREW program on patient care. CREW applications to private sector healthcare (e.g. Canada's Enhancing Workplace Communities initiative--Leiter, in press) and a growing interest from other US Government agencies (e.g. U.S. Air Force, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), university settings (e.g. Xavier university, OH) and private sector groups (e.g. QUEST Diversity Initiatives, New Zealand Health Authority, BC Biomedical Laboratories, Johnson & Johnson) clearly suggest that the principles and process of this program apply to a variety of clients and settings.

Limits and Conditions of Successful Application of CREW

Based on these authors' experience of implementing CREW at more than 1000 workplaces within the U.S.A. Department of Veterans Affairs from 2005 until now, CREW works best when it is purely voluntary for both the individuals and workgroups who participate in it.

This caveat can be difficult to accept for organizational leaders given how attractive the benefits are that CREW participation brings to individuals and organizations (e.g. Carameli et al., 2012; Leiter et al, 2010, 2011). Nevertheless, CREW is a culture change initiative, and truly effective culture change cannot be mandated. In Peter Senge's words (1994), a reality that can be difficult for leaders to accept is that the best we can do is create conditions for change within our organizations, by staying engaged ourselves and offering to others the incentives and opportunities, but taking these opportunities and implementing positive change remains the employees' own choice. Insofar as creating conditions for success of CREW is concerned, our practice has suggested the following. Once the groups that are interested in CREW participation have been identified, it is vital for the success of the program that it has visible support of senior leadership of the organization (e.g. a public statement of support by a CEO). It is equally important that supervisors of participating groups are supportive of CREW coming to their workgroups. These observations are consistent with prior research suggesting that workplace leaders can use their authority to model appropriate behavior (e.g., Tucker & Edmondson, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

The occupational or demographic composition of the group (i.e. group type) does not create limitations for conducting CREW, as long as the participating group includes individuals who interact with each other in connection with their work tasks. For example, in the VACREW has been used successfully with a wide variety of workgroups in both administrative and clinical areas. Participating workgroups have included clinical (e.g., dental, mental health, medical and surgical, emergency room, lab and pathology, primary care, chaplain services) and administrative functions (e.g., fiscal, human resources, medical records, call center, police, dietary, housekeeping, information and technology, engineering); frontline employees working 24 hour shifts as well as day shifts and night shifts, executive teams, union and management groups, inpatient groups, outpatient groups, interdisciplinary groups, and more. Because of its customizable approach, CREW can be designed to handle areas where employees work different shifts. It is common for only a portion of the workgroup to choose to participate in the CREW process, but the effects for the whole workgroup are still in evidence. In our experience within the VA, when CREW begins within a few groups at a facility (e.g. at a medical center), awareness of civility as an important aspect of the workplace quickly spreads across the organization and multiple groups approach CREW facilitators and/or the leaders of the facility inquiring how they can join the program as well.

CREW is not a recommended approach for highly dysfunctional workgroups with multiple grievances and significant turmoil; these need to be resolved before engaging in CREW, since conversations about civility require the levels of trust and goodwill that are unlikely when group members are engaged in an active conflict. CREW is also not helpful for resolving problems that stem from poor leadership or insufficient authority structure (e.g. poor managerial decisions, lack of supervisory competence or supervisory support). In other words, CREW is not an intervention for problematic workgroups, but it takes the good groups to becoming the great ones, by enhancing their well-being and productivity and preventing potential derailment. Based on conducting CREW within the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have found that not only is CREW ineffective for groups that function below the moderate level, but when applied to these, it hurts the organizational reputation of the program by creating its misperception as a punishment for bad workgroups. This perception ultimately hampers the spread of the CREW initiative through the organization.

CREW Applications to Diverse Individuals and Diverse Organizational Environments

The premise of CREW is a process-oriented, responsiveness-based approach rooted in client-centered thinking about organizational change. In applications to the organizational practice, CREW processes are flexible by design, i.e. standardization is not only impossible but also not desirable.

The customized approach to the implementation process is intentional as it reflects the program responsiveness to the goals of the organizational participants who co-create the intervention to fit the specific needs of their workplace; moreover, these needs and goals are understood to be changing over the course of the initiative. Shared aspects of the process across sites are nevertheless sufficiently well-defined to allow replication by interested organizational clients (see Osatuke et al., 2009, for more detail). CREW thus is a low-cost, low-tech initiative which proceeds from the grass root levels (within workgroups) and, given its custom-tailored implementation, can be organically grown and adapted to meet the needs of diverse clients and diverse organizational environments. At the time this chapter is written, nearly 10,000 employees within VA only have been touched by CREW.

Future Developments

The future of the CREW program and, more broadly, of interventions promoting civility on the job may proceed along these related but separate dimensions. First, what makes CREW unique is empirical evidence for its successful outcomes. To the extent that other programs supporting positive workplace climate are able to track their data allowing comparisons of pre- and post- outcomes, this would afford future comparisons of the intended impact and return on investment between CREW and other programs with a similar focus. Second, while both the impact of CREW on civility and the impact of civility levels on organizational outcomes have been demonstrated, there is still much to be learned about the range and efficiency of specific processes used for facilitating these outcomes. These questions can be answered based on the accumulating CREW data as well as from systematically examining the mechanisms and processes of change in other likeminded interventions.

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