

Exec Rudeness Roils Companies: Researcher

By [Amanda Gerut](#) July 13, 2015

CEOs who are viewed as curt, paternalistic and impolite in their interactions with employees can have a damaging influence throughout the company, directors have been warned.

Witnessing or being a victim of “uncivil behavior” demoralizes executives and leads to lower productivity and efficiency, says **Christine Porath**, an associate professor at **Georgetown University**, who has been studying workplace behavior for 20 years. Porath recently summarized many of her experiments and studies in an [opinion column](#) in *The New York Times*. For boards, Porath’s findings raise questions about how directors should evaluate CEOs’ behavior as well as the up-and-coming executives being groomed to become senior leaders.

According to Porath, there’s a distinction between CEOs and senior executives who are tough and direct and those who are uncivil. Behavior that is uncivil includes indiscreetly checking a phone in meetings, pointing out a colleague’s flaws in front of others and walking away in the middle of a conversation. The context is relevant as well. Verbal sparring and banter, for instance, can make some executives feel excluded, while others feel as though they’re part of the club.

On a biological level, people react to such behavior by producing higher levels of hormones that contribute to obesity and overeating, Porath’s experiments showed. Outwardly, people react by intentionally decreasing their efforts, caring less about the quality of their work and consequently exhibiting lower performance. The overall result is a workplace that is less collaborative and one in which employees lack conviction in their conclusions and are afraid to speak up.

Porath says executives who behave in these ways might still show strong results in spite of this type of behavior, but suggests that boards think seriously about whether executives who lack the ability to communicate clearly and respectfully with employees should become CEOs and senior leaders.

“Someone may look powerful, but that’s a different question than, ‘would you want to follow this person and give your all for this person?’” she says. “Those are the questions that really get at [whether] this person [is] CEO material.”

Do These Behaviors Seem Familiar?

The following traits are found in uncivil bosses:

- Interrupts people
- Pays little attention or shows little interest in others’ opinions
- Fails to pass on necessary information
- Neglects saying please or thank you
- Talks down to people

Source: The New York Times; Christine Porath

Peter Thies, an executive coach and succession expert, says that often executives are completely unaware of how their behavior is experienced by those around them. He recalls an executive he worked with who believed he had made a productive and motivating challenge to his team in a meeting. But when Thies interviewed the team afterward, they said the executive had just launched “a hand grenade.”

“It doesn’t matter what he or she thinks they said,” says Thies. “What matters is what people felt after the statement was made.”

He points out that uncivil behavior doesn’t just occur when a CEO or senior executive deals with direct reports. Thies recently was called upon to serve as a mediator for two executives who lacked chemistry and had difficulty working together. Not only were the two executives less effective in their roles, their behavior pattern was suspected of contributing to a lack of engagement among those around them.

“When a CEO and his or her executive team are known for this behavior, it’s a cultural cancer,” says Thies. “It’s that bad.”

What makes the issue a difficult one to parse for boards, however, is the fact that executives are typically on their best behavior around directors. Executives who display these behaviors and are strong producers for their companies still get promoted because such behavior is often downplayed as a mere personality quirk, Thies says. Yet, it can be very damaging culturally, he adds.

Indeed, **Jack Krol**, a veteran director on 12 boards and former CEO and chairman of **DuPont**, says he’s seen executives who behave like this stay in their positions at companies for years, and the employees underneath lack motivation and “rot,” he says.

Yet, boards now are more likely to become attuned to such behavior.

Thies says CEOs in the past were often reticent about divulging personality issues to boards because it could reflect poorly on the CEO, or it could make directors think negatively about a junior executive who simply needed coaching and experience. However, CEOs are becoming more forthcoming, he says. Plus, websites such as glassdoor.com, which collects salary information and reviews about workplace culture and CEOs, have made finding hints of this type of behavior more accessible to directors.

Even more, the types of CEOs boards want leading their organizations is evolving. This makes the question of whether or not a CEO exhibits the uncivil behaviors Porath describes more important than it was in the past, says **Tammy Erickson**, a former director on the boards of **Allergan** and **PerkinElmer**. Years ago, companies were focused on standardizing processes, lowering costs and ensuring that quality was consistent, she says.

“Somebody at the top who barked out orders may have been exactly the right thing,” Erickson says. “Today, that’s not what makes companies successful, by and large.”

Now, more companies are focused on getting employees excited about working collaboratively and thinking innovatively, she explains. The most effective leaders — the ones that people want to follow — are those who embody integrity, respect for others and open-mindedness.

Stuart Levine, a director on the board of **Broadridge Financial Solutions**, says two of the most important questions he asks CEO candidates are their views of the company and where it is headed, and a description of the team they lead.

“I want to understand what the team that they developed looks and feels like,” says Levine. “That’s a good indicator of whether the candidate or person has the ability to develop people, participate in a succession plan and to really hold people accountable.”

Levine, whose book *Cut to the Chase* deals with communicating efficiently and directly, says everyone is entitled to a “bad hair day,” but says there’s a paucity of talented people. If a senior leader or a CEO doesn’t know how to communicate strategically with executives, smart people won’t want to work for them.

“Rude is not an attribute that is attractive to people, particularly senior people who have other employment choices,” Levine says. “Direct communication is great, but disrespectful behavior is, frankly, not acceptable.”

Krol adds that boards can find out this type of information about a CEO or a CEO candidate if they dig deep enough. Discussions with people who work under the CEO, within reason and without abusing their time, will give directors perspective on how people feel about the CEO and the senior team.

In addition, experts agree that such behavior is coachable — sometimes. Thies says about 60% of the time, the behavior can be mitigated by coaching. He notes that he often sees executives react with surprise when they learn about how subordinates or colleagues view their behavior, and most want to reduce the negative impact of it.

But about 40% of the time, uncivil behavior stems from deeply ingrained parts of someone's personality, says Thies.

Porath says boards should focus on ensuring that company cultures value respectful behavior and communication. Plus, company leaders should be held accountable for their own behavior because it can trickle downward. Porath embarked on this course of research because she teaches an MBA management class and discovered many of her students were fearful about coming across as “nice,” she says.

“It's almost as if they think they're supposed to have this chip on their shoulder because it looks more powerful and leaderlike,” Porath says.

Erickson notes that uncivil behavior can also drain a company's talent. In her research, which focuses on generational differences among employees, she found swaths of talented executives in their late 30s and early 40s who said that they had no desire to become senior executives. Their reasoning had nothing to do with interest or not wanting responsibility, she says. Instead, they didn't want to assume the behaviors they believed senior executives had to have.

“I think a lot of corporations were and perhaps still are in danger of losing some of their best talent,” Erickson says. “The employees think that in order to reach the top they have to become a mean SOB.”