Megan Lowe Profile
Academic Incivility — What Would Miss Manners Say?

A colleague of mine sent me an article from the Chronicle of Higher Education from March 13, 2016, entitled “Halting Academic Incivility (That’s the Nice Word for It)” by Patrick M. Scanlon. Scanlon opens his article with a reference to a report published in 2015 in the Journal of Applied Psychology regarding incivility and ties it to “the regular calls for an end to faculty incivility — the rudeness, abusive language, bullying, and general meanness that seem to characterize many of our interactions.” He points out that academic incivility and solutions for it are frequently topics of discussion but appear to “have a hard time gaining traction” and are “subsumed under the broader and softer term ‘collegiality,’ the professional relationships that unite us in a common purpose.”

Scanlon offers several recommendations for how to deal with academic incivility including calling out such behavior in a non-confrontational manner (i.e., not singling out guilty parties but addressing the impropriety of such behavior); fostering the importance of academic civility by making incivility a topic of discussion; “establish[ing] written ground rules for conduct in meetings and remind attendees of them beforehand,” which requires an effective moderator; and reminding leaders and supervisors of their responsibility for checking such behavior.

Scanlon concludes his piece by stating that “we shouldn’t wink at obnoxious behavior among our colleagues in the name of academic freedom.” Considering how demoralized my colleagues and I have been by the incivility of PP, winking at her obnoxious behavior and simply accepting it clearly are not and never should have been viable options for dealing with her.

I have been asked why I have not yet filed formal complaints against PP with the university’s Human Resources department. One reason is that “While it may be immoral and unprofessional, it is not universally illegal in the United States for managers to threaten, insult, humiliate, ignore or mock employees.” Of course, PP is not my manager, but she is a colleague who engaged in some of the “immoral and unprofessional” behaviors represented in this list. In other words, it may well be debatable whether I have a leg to stand on for a formal complaint. But I bring up these behaviors because these and others are more problematic than simple incivility. They represent bullying behaviors which are unacceptable in any context. Bullies engage in a variety of behaviors: they “make personal insults, invade another’s personal space, make unwanted phone calls, use tact, make both verbal and nonverbal threats and intimidation, make sarcastic jokes and tease, write withering emails, engage in public shaming, make rude interruptions, engage in name-calling, make personal attacks, and make personal insults. These are all behaviors that should not be tolerated at any university.”