

Catch The Spirit of Civility

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It was a hot and sunny December afternoon in Kingston, Jamaica when I met a group of students who were walking home from school. Stopping to engage them in conversation, I mentioned that I would be visiting their school the next day to give a presentation on etiquette and civility. Before I could go any further, a boy in the group asked me "what is etiquette"? An instant reply was provided by one of the girls who told him most emphatically "something you need". I chuckled inwardly at the uncanny, simultaneous display of ignorance and savvy. The conversation did not get into civility, but it certainly came up during my presentation the following day as it frequently does when I am training. On almost every such occasion I am asked "What is civility"? To answer this question and the one originally posed by the young man we can certainly begin by saying that it is something everyone, everywhere in the world needs more of.

So just what is civility? Does it mean being good, kind or to say nice things to others. Where did it come from and why do we need it? Civility is all about manners, politeness, courtesy, image and ethics. Civility in action demonstrates consideration, sensitivity, caring and kindness in the way we treat each other and our surroundings. It a code of conduct that should guide our behavior, appearance and communication. Civility is therefore the substance or the foundation of image and personal relationships. The civility code of conduct is based on three Rs- Respect, Restraint and Responsibility. There is no mystery or secret formula to this code. Everyone rich and poor, young and old can apply the principles in their daily lives and reap huge benefits.

The origins of civility lie in the word *civitas*, a Latin word meaning city. The often overcrowded condition of cities meant that people had to abide by a certain code of behavior in order to get along with each other and have comfortable and positive relationships. Civility then was reflected in care and concern for the well being of fellow citizens and a sense of neighborly good will and citizenship. It can well be argued as Stephen Carter discusses in his book "Civility – Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy" that there is a profound absence of civility in the cities we know today.

How are the principles of civility applied in daily life? Certainly most people would be quick to say that they are respectful, responsible and apply self control in their behavior. Why then do inconsiderate acts flourish in every walk of life across the globe? Every day, everywhere, incivility rears its ugly head to create unpleasant and unacceptable situations. Be they large or small, acts of incivility intrude upon and mar our daily lives as we travel on airplanes, roads and trains, sit in classrooms, offices, sports arenas and as we shop, pray and play with our children. Failing to acknowledge or interact with our neighbors is quite common in today's urban and suburban communities. Unwillingly or unwittingly we have learned to live with these unacceptable behaviors. The good news is that the guiding principles of the civility code of conduct and the rules for applying them in daily living provide a prescription for transforming lives by improving the way we relate to each other. They can change negative behaviors and create better relationships for everyone. As life is all about relationships this is fundamental.

It was in the fall of 2006 when I first heard Dr. P.M. Forni speak about civility as a way of improving relationships and making the world a better place to live. He discussed this in the context of his book *Choosing Civility - The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* (St. Martin's Press). The rules include such considerate acts as paying attention, acknowledging others, caring for your guest and accepting responsibility for your actions. These are indeed no cost actions we can all take. Dr. Forni is professor of Italian Literature at Johns Hopkins University and founder of the JHU Civility Project, launched in 1998. I was immensely inspired by Dr. Forni's comments. After

reading the book my first reaction was to acknowledge how empowering it would be to embrace these principles in my personal life and family on a daily basis. At the time, I was involved in the debut of *Every Girl Can*, a life skills and personal development program I wrote for pre-teen and adolescent youth girls at Takoma Park Middle school in Maryland, USA. I saw the opportunity to incorporate the civility principles and rules of conduct into this program which focuses on managing personal image and identity, etiquette, self confidence, positive self expression and self esteem. I have also integrated the civility principles and rules of conduct into my training seminars for adults. Participants are always amazed, gratified and encouraged by the simplicity of the code of conduct rules. They easily identify everyday examples of how the rules can be used to improve relationships in the home, school, community and workplace.

Dr. Forni's new book *The Civility Solution – What to do when People Are Rude* (St. Martin's Press) offers a prescription that can be applied to everyday situations such as loud and intrusive cell phone calls, bullying or rude internet communication. When incorporated into everyday lives the civility help us present our best attributes and shape a positive image or personal brand. The rules are practical, common sense actions everyone can take.

By embracing the spirit of civility in our personal lives, or business coaching, training or team work opens the door to personal transformation that can result in caring, compassion, and considerate behavior. Individuals, companies, organizations and even countries can shape or reshape their image, brand and style by incorporating the civility principles and rules of conduct. The 2008 Beijing Olympics is a most compelling example of this. By its own account, China spent \$43 Billion to stage a spectacular event that embodied camaraderie, cooperation, team work and excellence that will long be etched in our memories. The event influenced our perception of China as seen on television. The Chinese government's act of caring and sensitivity for the thousands of Olympic visitors included a demonstration of excellence and dedication to artistic, architectural and athletic expression by its people. It also included teaching Chinese citizens how to smile and speak a minimum amount of English to facilitate warm and helpful interactions. Although there is much more to China than was seen on television during the Olympics, these measures demonstrated civility in action.

AICI has embarked on a new journey to spread a civility epidemic around the world. The Civility Project will officially kick off during the May 2009 conference in Irvine California. The AICI Marketing Committee under the direction of VP Katherine Wurzburg has been working hard to craft civility press messages and develop training programs to educate the public, our membership and the AICI Board on this important topic. The mission of our Civility Project is to increase public awareness of the meaning of civility and help the world to embrace the civility code of conduct. The desired result is that this will improve relationships and help make the world a better place to live. Civility gives substance to image and consultants and trainers can directly benefit by embracing and living the principles and incorporating the rules in their training, coaching, programs and interactions with clients. It is important that we begin this journey within our Association by embracing civility in our behavior, communication with each other and our appearance to reflect responsibility, respect consideration and control. Civility goes hand in hand with image and personal branding, both from the esthetic and ethical points of view. Embracing the rules of considerate conduct is a great place to begin the process of change in our relationships and ultimately the world.

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