

Agency for Change Podcast: Amanda Barker and Emerson Belitz, PRSSA, The Civility Effect Campaign

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Kelley Peterson:

Hello, changemakers. This is Kelley Peterson, vice president, nonprofit creative director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. After the Capitol riot early in 2021, many people were left wondering where has civility gone? And how can we bring civility back? These questions inspired a group of students at the University of Nebraska Lincoln to launch a public relations campaign called the Civility Effect. Today's guests are Emerson Belitz, an advertising and public relations major at UNL and project manager for the Civility Effect Campaign, and Amanda Barker, deputy executive director of Civic Nebraska, the partner organization for this campaign. Welcome, Emerson and Amanda. I can't wait to dive into this topic today.

Emerson Belitz:

Good morning, Kelley. Great to be here.

Amanda Barker:

Thanks for having us. We're thrilled to be here.

Kelley Peterson:

You bet. Emerson, your team came up with a great analogy to describe the impact that small, uncivil interactions have on the rise of incivility in the United States. Tell us about the Civility Effect.

Emerson Belitz:

Yes. The Civility Effect is a movement designed to combat the rise of incivility that we've all witnessed in our country. Like the impact of knocking over a single domino, one civil or uncivil action can trigger a chain reaction that has the potential to drastically change a person's life and even the world. The Civility Effect is based on the fact that the choice is yours and you should always choose civility, even though it's not always going to be comfortable or easy.

Kelley Peterson:

I like how you pick the domino to depict it. I can just see in my mind that ripple effect when you talk about those small, uncivil interactions. The Civility Effect website mentioned that you were motivated by firsthand accounts of incivility. Can you tell us how you've experienced incivility in your life?

Emerson Belitz:

Yeah. I think that unfortunately we've all got examples of when things weren't exactly civil. Especially nowadays, I feel like we are really desensitized to incivility. It's almost a norm now, which is, like I said,

super unfortunate. Personally, I've been very lucky. I don't have a whole lot to complain about in terms of not being treated fairly or getting into arguments about things like that. However, after being exposed to this campaign, I would say that I'm more conscious of it. I'm way more aware of where things aren't exactly going civilly, if we want to use that word.

Emerson Belitz:

But I guess for me, incivility means a lot more than just being mean. Incivility is when we're refusing to have dialogue, which I've experienced plenty of times with my roommates or my family or just in day-to-day interactions, which I think is a key point in the campaign—bringing some awareness to the fact that civility doesn't mean politeness. It doesn't mean being nice. It means having difficult conversations that improve the state of civility in society that really move us on to progress rather than digress into the same cycles of everything that's going on.

Kelley Peterson:

It's interesting when you said we just seem to be more and more desensitized, and I think you're right. When you have something that you're experiencing, you've just learned about or you've gained that piece of knowledge, then you own it. And it seems prevalent everywhere. And the life example I have for that is when I was pregnant, it seemed like I would go out in public and I would see all these pregnant people. Well, there's always pregnant people in this world, but when I'm experiencing it personally, it seems more of an issue, and what they're going through I'm going through at the same time.

Kelley Peterson:

If we boost our knowledge about incivility, we can recognize when it is happening more often and do something about it. I'm sure you're going to tell us what this campaign is all about so we learn more about it and it's in our world, and then we can see it when it's happening and do something about it. The Civility Effect's ultimate mission is to promote civility in public discourse. Tell me how the campaign is reaching out to public relations professionals.

Emerson Belitz:

Of course. After the research portion of our campaign, where we decided that PR professionals are uniquely positioned to affect change in the state of civility in society, we decided that in order to provide the best information possible, the best tools and resources, we needed a partner, we needed an expert in the field. And that was when we decided to reach out to Civic Nebraska and ask for their help in crafting a virtual workshop geared towards PR professionals and the crucial role that they play in bettering the state of civility. They do have the ability to craft those messages. They are the voice that not only coworkers, but also clients and audience members, hear from. They have the ability to shift the vernacular, if you will.

Emerson Belitz:

That workshop actually took place this week on Tuesday, March 3rd, via Zoom, where we were lucky enough to have the chance to inform roughly 30 PR professionals from all across the state of Nebraska. We had some people from Omaha. We even had some from Scotts Bluff. We were able to inform them on the ins and outs of civility and give them a chance to practice the tools and skills they learned. There were some really neat breakout discussions where we got to hear from individuals on a number of questions, like “How do you see civility differing from just being professional?” Those are conversations

that need to be had. And I was really, really proud to be able to start those conversations with these PR professionals, and I hope they carry them with them after the workshop.

Kelley Peterson:

What an amazing experience for those 30 individuals, and for your whole team and Civic Nebraska as well. It's a great experience. And especially to come together and have conversations and build knowledge like that. I also have to say, when you were giving props about crafting good messages, you're speaking my love language there. Being a marketing communications professional, it is all about the public relations out there. Crafting messages that people can really own, that resonate with them and that they can then speak in their profession or in their personal lives, is really dynamic. Thank you for putting that workshop together. Another target audience for the campaign is college students. How are you promoting civility among students?

Emerson Belitz:

Yes, we hosted an on-campus event called the Civility Effect Experience where we invited students to come out and learn what it means to be civil, take a civility pledge and work together with fellow students to assemble a large-scale domino demonstration that depicted the impact a single civil or uncivil action can have. This is what we decided to call the Civility Effect, which eventually became our campaign name as well.

Emerson Belitz:

That student event was a lot of fun. We hung out in front of the Nebraska union, grabbed students while they were on their way to class just walking across campus and really tried to have a dialogue about what civility meant to them. And it was interesting to hear a lot of their different answers, because it definitely solidified the research we'd done that said civility is very multifaceted and has a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people, so it's important we put the right definition and the right information about what it's not in the minds of students. We also gave away 12 Domino's Pizza gift cards to some lucky students who attended the Civility Effect Experience event and who have also been interacting with us on social media. We thought the Domino's gift card was a perfect tie-in with the campaign.

Kelley Peterson:

I do too. And again, speaking as a marketer, that's incredible brand alignment. I'm sure Domino's Pizza loved that it was used to promote civility in the world. When I think about just the word civility and students out there—and I know the students today are a lot savvier than myself—but civility is a concept that doesn't necessarily roll off the tongue and isn't in the top of people's minds. It's really great to hear that you brought people together to think about that word and have a new definition of it. And it really matters for the future that they have that definition and carry it in their minds. I'm going to switch over to Amanda for a little bit. Amanda, can you tell us how Civic Nebraska works to create a more modern, robust democracy for all Nebraskans?

Amanda Barker:

Yes, I would love to. As a 501(c)(3) (or a nonprofit), we primarily accomplish that mission through three main program areas. The first is our youth civic leadership program area, where we work with students K-12, primarily in the before and after school settings—so community learning centers, afterschool clubs, et cetera—to help them understand what it means to be a good community member and how we

identify opportunities to advance the community, the neighborhood and the school through the work they do. We serve about 1,500 students a day in Lincoln, Omaha and greater Nebraska through those youth civic leadership programs, clubs like a young women's circles club or a community engagement or service learning club. We love our work in our schools and with our students because we know young people have a lot to contribute to their communities.

Amanda Barker:

We also do it through our civic health programs. That's a program area that I oversee, and similar to our youth civic leadership, we talk a lot about what it means to be a good community member, just not necessarily with students. We work with adults; we work with whole communities. We do things like civil discourse programming, which is why we're here today. But with the work we do in civic health, we love to talk about how to build up communities and community members.

Amanda Barker:

And then finally, our voting rights program area is our flagship. That's how Civic Nebraska got its start 10-12 years ago. It's where we work to really make modern election systems more accessible. We do that through a policy portfolio, but we also do it through a lot of voter education and "get out the vote" work. Obviously, with the municipal elections coming up in Lincoln and Omaha this spring, our voting rights team is working hard to make sure every resident of those two communities knows that this is an important moment for the future of their community. We're electing leaders who very much matter in how we live our day-to-day lives. That's what we do, and we always love working with members of any community across the state of Nebraska.

Kelley Peterson:

Great! I love the sound of building community, and that has to be something great to wake up to every day—knowing you're going to show up to work and work towards it. That's really great. Amanda, can you share examples of incivility that you've seen?

Amanda Barker:

Absolutely! I think we look at incivility in terms of four different spheres, or civil discourse happens in four different spheres. First is the interpersonal sphere. We see civility and incivility happening a lot person to person. Whether that's around the dinner table at Thanksgiving time with your extended family and suddenly the conversation starts to devolve, whether that's name calling or saying that's a stupid viewpoint. We see that a lot—person to person incivility happens a lot. And I think that's probably where a lot of the harm is done. It damages relationships and people tend to shut down. We see that happening in that sphere.

Amanda Barker:

We also see it happening on social media. That's a sphere of itself. And that's probably been on the rise in the last several years as platforms have evolved. Although you can have a great conversation on social media, you can also have plenty of instances of incivility. Again, name calling or people not using fact-based arguments. Misinformation and disinformation have really seeped into our civil discourse over the last several years. And that's an issue we want to address in this work.

Amanda Barker:

We also see incivility in the public sphere. When we think about deliberative bodies, like the unicameral or the Nebraska legislature. Not to call out any particular senator or person, but if you're name calling, if you are using snark or sarcasm to make a point or kind of win the notion, then you're probably not doing it with that basis of civil discourse or civility.

Amanda Barker:

And then, of course, we even see incivility in the mass media sphere as well. And whether that's again using spin or slant to mislead readers, that's an example of incivility in itself. Again, civil discourse aims for this open, honest dialogue to move us all forward as individuals and as a collective society. And so certainly there are folks who are guilty of that. That's where we see it play out, those four different spheres of civil discourse. Each sphere is a little bit different, so we have to make sure we're adjusting our tools and our techniques accordingly.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely. I really appreciate you talking about those fears. I never thought about those four different places where incivility can happen. For pure enjoyment I have a pug who has his own Instagram. I'm not doing this to plug him by any means, but what's interesting about that is it's just pure joy for me, but there are people on his Instagram who say, "You're inhumane because you own a pug. They should have never been bred!"—these kinds of things. And then you look at their account and they have zero posts and zero followers—it's someone who is coming against pug owners or my little old self here in Lincoln, Nebraska, with my pug Chubs.

Kelley Peterson:

And you think, *what is the positivity of that happening? What is the good outcome?* As much as I have that discourse happen, I also have the opposite, where there is a whole social community of pug lovers who these bring such joy to life, or any dog does for that matter. And they're saying, "Don't pay attention to that. This is a troll." I had to understand and look up what a troll is. I never, of course in my childhood, knew what trolls were.

Amanda Barker:

Different.

Kelley Peterson:

Yeah, different kind of a troll. I did feel like it was a monster under the bridge, maybe attacking me at that time. But I didn't realize that there was even a definition of a troll, and that would be somebody who's trying to fire somebody else up so they can have incivility or public discourse with each other. Can you speak to that a little bit, Amanda?

Amanda Barker:

Yeah. I think your example is spot on. I don't know how anybody could be upset at sweet Chubs, the pug. But social media is a really hot sphere for incivility, as we can imagine. And I think it's because there are good things that can happen on those platforms—what you shared about having kind of a community of pug lovers and, honestly, animal lovers. There's a really positive and uplifting side of that, but there's also this negative side where people target emotions. We know that social media is really designed to target your emotions, to get some sort of emotional response, which leads into perhaps a lack of discipline when it comes to civility. One of our values of civil discourse, or essentially the skill

bases that we need to be able to regularly enter into civil discourse, is empathy and employing emotional discipline. And that's particularly difficult on social media.

Amanda Barker:

Empathy is maybe interrupted when you don't know the other person, the account that you're following. It's just a person behind a screen, behind a keyboard that you can demean or take down or make critical comments toward. Again, I don't know how you could do that to a sweet pug. And then we also see with the emotional discipline again, it's hard to maintain your emotional discipline when these platforms are really designed to get you heated up and keep scrolling or swiping. That's the whole design and premise of social media. Again, not saying it's entirely bad. I'm saying it's a bigger lift to stay empathetic and emotionally disciplined on social platforms, which is perhaps why we see these growing examples or a growing tide of incivility on social media.

Kelley Peterson:

I completely agree with that. And I think too, for Emerson and the whole team in engaging the students, that social media is part of all of our lives, but students live on it. That's another way you can see some of that incivility take place, as well as some of that great civility that's taking place there too. Amanda, what does success look like to you for the Civility Effect campaign?

Amanda Barker:

Great question, Kelley. I won't speak for the Bateman team, and Emerson can touch on this, but I think by getting these concept—these tools and strategies of how to approach civil discourse from a peer professional, a college student or just a standard adult, standard Nebraskan—to get that out further into the world is successful concept for us. Since January 6th, we're all looking to our public sphere or shared collective discourse to say, "How can we do better?" And so for the Civility Effect campaign, I think it's successful if we're able to really take advantage of that interest that people are demonstrating now in a time of social upheaval, saying, "There is a path forward, there is a way to do this and to do it civilly. And here's the use case for it."

Amanda Barker:

We know there's also a business case or an economic case for civility too. I think—and Emerson, correct me if I'm wrong on this—but I think companies have reported the cost of civility to a brand, to maybe losing staff or turnover of staff because of incivility in the workplace, to the tune of \$14,000 a year. We know that there's a use case or an economic case for civility. And to demonstrate that to the broader public at a time when interest is high would be a really, really successful thing. We're hoping we're doing that.

Kelley Peterson:

Absolutely! When you were talking about this being the time to think about how we can do better and take that positive path forward, that reminded me that you've said so many inspirational things in our short time today. But I'm always inspired by motivational quotes. And I'm just wondering if you could give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners.

Amanda Barker:

That is generous of you. If I had to boil it down, I would say a two part punch. One, don't avoid hard conversations. Civil discourse is a muscle. You've got to use it. If that's all that anybody takes away, I'd consider that a win. Civil discourse is a muscle. You've got to use it.

Kelley Peterson:

I love that. Maybe there'll be a billboard with that phrase and your name on it soon.

Amanda Barker:

If anybody can do that, It would be Emerson and her team of incredible professionals.

Kelley Peterson:

I agree.

Amanda Barker:

Pass it over to her.

Kelley Peterson:

I agree with that too. Emerson, do you also have a motivational quote to share?

Emerson Belitz:

Yeah, I definitely can speak to that as well. And Amanda, we'll work on it. We'll get that billboard up for you. I think it's perfect. As part of our campaign, we did want to come up with a slogan or a little message that was going to be easily remembered by people and that fit in with what we were trying to say but said it in a really concise way. That quote, if you will, that we came up with is, "The choice is yours, choose civility." It just branches off of that idea that one person can make a difference if they simply choose civility over pride, taking things personally and all of those other negative things.

Kelley Peterson:

That is great. And I think not only people, but possibly pugs might be able to make a positive choice as well. There are people behind that, which I realize. But it's even that it is making a positive move forward and choosing to be civil. The Civility Effect campaign is part of a national public relations competition for college students. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Emerson Belitz:

Yeah. My four teammates and I created the Civility Effect campaign as members of the UNL and PRSSA Bateman team. The Bateman team is a case study competition put on by the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). It is the premier national case study competition for PR students across the nation. Essentially, students are tasked with researching, planning, implementing and then evaluating a PR campaign for an actual client. This year, the client was technically PRSSA, but teams were tasked with modeling civility and teaching how PR professionals can restore quality, integrity and inclusiveness to public discourse. As I mentioned before, student teams started working on the campaign all the way back in October, and we worked through the end of March on the Bateman competition.

Kelley Peterson:

Well, if you ask me, I think you nailed it. But I realize with any of this hard work, and especially since you have been working on it since October, that it's a team effort. I wish I could have everyone on your team as part of this podcast, but it's a little hard to manage all of those different voices. Again, I thank you and Amanda for joining me today, but I'm going to give you the floor to do some shoutouts to your teammates.

Emerson Belitz:

Of course. There's no doubt in my mind that this campaign wouldn't be what it is without each and every member of the team. We've all been so valuable in so many different ways, and I think every single person has really brought their A game. I want to give all of them a shoutout since they can't be with us today. As mentioned, I'm the team's project manager and I have the privilege to share the floor with our copywriter, Kateri Hartman, our creative manager, Arielle Wiedenbeck, our community relations manager, Morgan Libsack, and our media relations manager, Hallie Miller.

Kelley Peterson:

Congrats to everyone on the team, and I hope they have a chance to listen to this because it's been really great and really inspirational, and I think it continues to get the word out about your incredible project, the Civility Effect. For people who would like to learn more, how can they get connected with this effort and find it online?

Emerson Belitz:

For more info on the Civility Effect, you can follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Our tag is simply #CivilityEffect. We should pop up, and when you see the profile picture with the five dots, that is us. You can also visit our website, thecivilityeffect.org, and access all of our campaign materials. Also, any PR professionals who were unable to attend the virtual workshop can now watch a recording of that webinar housed on the ambassador hub of our website, as well as Civic Nebraska's YouTube channel.

Kelley Peterson:

Wonderful. Keeping it out there and accessible. I love that.

Emerson Belitz:

You betcha.

Kelley Peterson:

As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the Civility Effect campaign?

Emerson Belitz:

The most important thing I want people to take away from our campaign is that change is possible. Progress is possible. Oftentimes we all feel so bogged down by what we see in the news, in the workplace, even at our own dinner tables, that we start believing that civility is no longer an option, it's no longer valuable, which is very much untrue. Productive dialogue isn't meant to be easy or comfortable, but again, anything worth doing doesn't really come without a challenge. Our campaign is based on the idea that even though you might not be able to change what happens on a larger scale—

say a presidential debate floor—you can still make a meaningful impact by choosing civility in your own interpersonal lives.

Kelley Peterson:

Wow! Those are some inspirational words and phrases, and I hope we all internalize that and live positively with that direction. Emerson and Amanda, thank you for being changemakers and sharing how you are inspiring us all to model civility each and every day.

Emerson Belitz:

Thank you so much for having us.

Amanda Barker:

Thank you.

Kelley Peterson:

My pleasure.

Announcer:

You've been listening to Agency for Change. If you're enjoying these inspiring stories, please subscribe. Is there a changemaker you'd like to recommend for this podcast? Just visit the KidGlov website at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to share or to listen to more stories about the people behind positive change.