

# AINsight: Restoring Civility in the Workplace

by Sheryl Barden

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Everywhere I go it seems like controversial topics quickly become front and center. At my book club, my weekly golf group, in work meetings, and of course on TV.

As a nation, we've become extremely divided—and it's negatively affecting our workforce culture. Our business aviation community is not immune.

Case in point: I recently spoke with an aviation director on how polarized his team has become. He recounted a story of a pilot who wanted to “unpair” from a copilot who was on the other side politically. He didn't want to spend three hours listening to his colleague's strong opinions—with no escape.

Another aviation leader had a flight attendant come to him because she felt uncomfortable working trips with certain crewmembers. These colleagues were on the same side of the political spectrum and openly “bashed” people who held differing opinions. Not only did the flight attendant feel uncomfortable speaking up for herself, but she felt uncomfortable having to listen to their constant rhetoric.

These divisions are creating risks on many levels—operationally, emotionally, and physically. And of course, none of it is actually helping us become better at what we're here to do: to provide the most efficient and safe travel experience possible for our clients.

## CULTURE WARS

In business aviation, we work incredibly closely, spending significant time together on the road and in the air. Whether in the airplane, in the hangar, or over a meal, conversations turn personal. But when those conversations turn to tirades and deeply held opinions—whether it be about Covid masks, racism, guns, LGBTQ rights, or other hot-button topics—it can reach a point where work begins to feel like a hostile, contentious environment.

If you're in the minority with your beliefs, you can feel marginalized and isolated and become reluctant to interact with others. This undermines the communicative safety culture that we've all worked so hard to develop in business aviation.

There are some silver linings, however. As we begin a new year, many of us are cleaning the slate to find a better approach. A massive vaccination plan will hopefully help us return to some semblance of normality. And with that normality, of course, there's the promise of more travel opportunities.

# A PLEA FOR CIVILITY

So what can we do? For starters, let's seek out ways to bring more civility, respectfulness, and understanding to the workplace.

Following are several ways:

**Lead by example.** Discuss what's appropriate and set expectations for professionalism and maturity. Implement a no-tolerance policy, if needed. Whether you're the boss or not, be bold enough to cut off anyone starting down a polarizing path. This can be done with diplomacy and even levity; drawing a boundary doesn't have to mean confrontation.

**Find common ground.** Bring up neutral subjects such as the weather, the kids or grandkids, training, past trips, sports, or other hobbies.

**Turn down the noise.** Whether at the hangar, the office, the FBO, or working virtually, eliminate distractions from social media, news channels, and talk radio. The constant and pervasive information stream only keeps charged issues top of mind.

**Seek to understand.** Recognize that people are incredibly complex—we are not merely the sum of our political and/or religious beliefs.

**Recommit.** Keep your opinions to yourself and take responsibility for your actions. Then commit to your colleagues how you propose to conduct yourself, and do so with professionalism and grace. Consider making an unspoken promise to enjoy them for who they are beyond the divisiveness that has derailed us.

Being civil toward our colleagues and family members isn't rocket science. But it does mean that we all have to work harder to make it happen. In spite of our challenges, I truly believe we can come together. It will take hard work, but we can and must re-establish that enviable sense of family-like camaraderie for which business aviation has always been regarded.

*Sheryl Barden is the president and CEO of Aviation Personnel International, the longest-running recruiting and HR consulting firm exclusively serving the needs of business aviation. A thought leader on all things related to business aviation professionals, Barden serves on NBAA's board of directors and is chair of the NBAA advisory council.*

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