



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Cultivate Civility

**A human moment occurs anytime two or more people are together, paying attention to one another.**

—Edward Hallowell

**A**dministrative teams and schools faculties often establish group agreements to make explicit the ground rules by which they will conduct their work together. While reading P. M. Forni's *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, I realized that most group agreements are at their essence about the cultivation of civility. Incivility, Forni observes, causes stress, erodes self-esteem, damages relationships, and poisons the workplace. What Forni has to say about civility may be of value to leaders who wish to create cultures whose relationships are permeated with caring, sensitivity, and respect. (Civility within schools is of sufficient importance that I will devote four columns to it.)

"Being civil," Forni writes, "means being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect, and consideration into the very fabric of that awareness." Civility means conferring regard, which Forni defines as observing and noting what is happening around us. "Only after we notice the world can we begin to care for it," he says. "Every act of kindness is, first of all, an act of attention." Forni adds, "With training in civility we develop the invaluable habit of considering that no action of ours is without consequences for others and anticipating what those consequences will be."

As with other cultural attributes, the cultivation of civility begins with a change in leaders. And because the quality of leaders' attention to others and to their own thoughts and feelings is the core attribute of civility, it is the starting point for leaders' own development. Leaders can cultivate the quality of their attention by:

- Intentional, sustained practice in a variety of settings. For example, leaders may choose faculty meetings or one-to-one conversations to practice attending to the thoughts and feelings of others and noting to themselves and perhaps to others what they observed.
- Periodically turning their attention to the present moment by noticing their own breathing or sounds in their immediate environment, such as a ringing telephone, that restore awareness.
- Deliberately creating "spaces" between what others say and their responses to them. Slowing down the speed of the exchange and using a few seconds to thoroughly consider the other's point of view improves leaders' attention and the quality of their communication and relationships.

When leaders cultivate their own civility by increasing the moment-to-moment attention they provide to others and to themselves, they truly lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

**DENNIS SPARKS** is an "itinerant teacher" who assists leadership teams in developing their capacity to continuously improve teaching and learning in all classrooms. He is emeritus executive director of the National Staff Development Council, where he served as executive director from 1984-2007. He can be reached at [thinkingpartner@comcast.net](mailto:thinkingpartner@comcast.net).

