«Rudeness is a weak person's imitation of strength» Eric Hoffer

The stupid pitfalls of rudeness

Giancarlo Livraghi – December 2012

I was having some problems turning into English my recent comments in Italian about "vulgarity" (*Danni e stupidità della volgarità* gandalf.it/onde/volgare.pdf). It's a worldwide disease, but it takes different shapes in different cultures. Useful help comes from William Bouffard's remarkable book, *Puttin' Cologne on the Rickshaw* (there are some quotations in gandalf.it/stupid/review10.pdf).
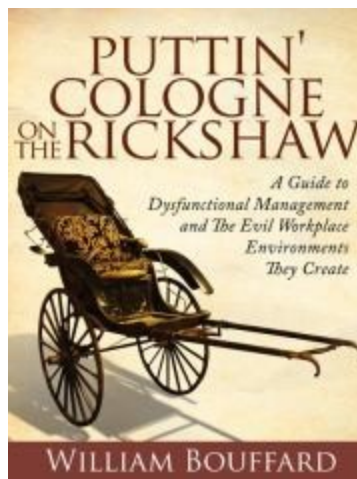
William Bouffard calls it "rudeness" – and indeed this fits the concept. Of course there is much more in his work than just defining the subject. This is how he explains the problem in the first chapter of his book.

«Since the world is full of rude, un-caring and uncivil people, not only in the work place but everywhere, what's to do? Most people can't just take it in stride and turn the other cheek, instead they must retaliate in kind and so this evil chain of events keeps unfolding and intensifying.»

«I've come to the conclusion that this "me" generation thinking is probably not coming to an end any time soon. That's because it's not generational at all, it crosses all ages, race and demographics; all industries and backgrounds.»

«Therefore we must just accept the world for what it is – just plain full of rude people who don't care for anyone but themselves and are oblivious to the havoc they leave in their wake. What we can do, though, is understand the behaviors of this ilk so that we can fight fire with fire.»

«That being said, if the world is ever going to change from rude and uncivil to well-mannered, it's important to understand what drives rude behavior. I believe the answer is simple – just plain old stupidity.»

Aye, there's the rub. This isn't just a matter of good manners.

«I believe that the workplace is just as uncivil, moronic and rude as in the wilds of everyday life. Think about it: if regular everyday life is one bout after another with uncivil, stupid morons, then why should we think that our work life can be something different?»

Interestingly, in the development of his analysis Bill Bouffard identifies dysfunctional managers as "sociopaths".

«A sociopath is a person incapable of feeling empathy, guilt or remorse for the way he or she treats people. Other major traits of a sociopath are narcissism and egomania. For a true sociopath, business relationships are only seen as a game. Sociopaths view people as objects (tools) to be manipulated, and their narcissistic behavior wreaks havoc on everyone they work with, and especially those who work for them.»

«The sociopaths are the people who make the average workplace the abusive dysfunctional environment that it is. Frankly, the sociopathic behavior (including bullying) prevalent in today's workplace is nothing short of just plain evil, and we'll discover later how the behavior of these thugs can make work and your life nothing short of a living hell.»

This is getting very close to the medical definition of the basic mental disease of financial manipulators. *«Corporate psychopaths who have a genetic condition that prevents them from feeling normal human empathy.»* (As explained in pages 8-9 of *Once upon a time, the market* – gandalf.it/stupid/market.pdf and also in *Empathy* – pages 3-5 in *Of mice and men* gandalf.it/offline/rats.pdf).

While the "sociopaths" in other sorts of organizations and environments may not necessarily be incurable clinical psychopaths, the awful fact is that such behavior is widespread in a growing multitude of "evil workplace environments" and expanding from there into the private lives of people, causing a poisonous combination of fear, distrust, depression and hostility.

Rudeness isn't only a matter of vocabulary or tone of voice. It's behavior, attitude, state of mind. People, groups and organizations can be extremely rude, blatantly obscene, awfully cruel, without using "four-letter words" or impolite language. There is a distressing lack of empathy (as well as selfish wickedness) in bureaucratic abstruseness, political jargon, obscure academic disquisitions, pretentious pseudo-scientific dissertations – etcetera. And the hypocritical manipulations of the "economic crisis" are making it even worse.

Of course rudeness and stupidity, in all their ways and disguises, make us angry. But if we try to "retaliate in kind" or "fight fire with fire" we are spreading the disease. There are ways of being incisive, piercing, even aggressive, without being rude. A well placed strike of irony, or a touch of sober clarity, can be much more effective than a scream or an insult.

This isn't easy. But it's often useful, before we rush into a fight, or fall into depression, to find some time for thinking. Whatever we do, there will always be fools who don't understand and psychopaths who don't listen. But it's much more productive to seek a dialogue with people who haven't totally lost their minds. It can be refreshing, and sometimes pleasantly surprising, to discover who they are and where they may be hiding.

I don't mean to say that we shouldn't be angry. We have lots of awful reasons to be quite furious about what's happening in our neighborhood and all over the world. But we are not going to solve any of these problems by shouting, whining or being mindlessly rude.

One of my personal problems is that I am irritated by the appalling behavior of "mass media". I am always doing my best to be informed, to understand, to reduce my ignorance. It's a pretty difficult task anyhow, but it's made stupidly worse by the need to wade through a grotesque amount of misinformation. I called it in*g*ormation in an article I published in September, 2012 (gandalf.it/offline/ingormat.pdf) and I find more examples of this disease every day.

But I wasn't just "complaining" when I wrote about this problem and I don't mean to waste any time doing so now. What really matters is to understand that, in any case, we always need to look beyond the surface of repetitive superficiality if we wish to find something that is really interesting.

It's the same with rudeness. It's a waste of time to attack it frontally, as this generally just produces more of the same. The result is an enormous amount of useless and unpleasant (pardon my language) bullshit. (As explained in gandalf.it/offline/bullshit.pdf).

When we look a bit more carefully, we find that rudeness and vulgarity aren't as totally dominating as they seem. Kindness, goodwill, sympathy, mutual respect are removed from the limelight, but they aren't extinct.

Of course we need to avoid the many hypocritical, sanctimonious fakes. But it's worth the effort to look for real humanity where it exists. True kindness is rarely recognized, rewarded or applauded. However, finding and nourishing it is the most effective tool against the evil power of ruling sociopaths. And, small or rare as it may be, it's a very pleasant experience. It can be more effective against depression than neurology, psychiatry or pills.

Anyhow rudeness, arrogance and vulgarity are symptoms of ambiguity, confused ideas, insincerity – often outright, shameless lying. Wherever they surface, they can't be trusted.