Keeping in touch

Civility
IN THE WORKPLACE

By Susan Williams, *Village Trainer*

While wandering through Costco the other day in search of large totes, I found myself in a bit of a predicament. I spotted the totes I wanted to buy, but there was a small problem— they were perched on the very top shelf. As a shorter person, accessing them was a real chore. Balancing on my tiptoes, I was just about to lose my grip when, out of nowhere, a stranger dashed over from the men's jeans section. He grabbed the tub, steadied it, and asked if I needed any more. In the grand scheme of things, it was a minor gesture. Yet, how wonderful it felt to be noticed and supported! People could have pointed and laughed, made things harder, or simply walked by. No harm would have been done if he hadn't helped, yet lo and behold, some stranger made my day through a small act of kindness.

I'm afraid that in so many situations in our society we aren't like the stranger, or even like the other customers who simply walked by. Instead, we often do things that are counterproductive and make life harder for others, for seemingly no reason other than we don't always truly see others for who they are and support them.

In my role as a trainer at The Village I'm both heartened and discouraged at how many times our course **Civility in the Workplace** gets requested. On one hand, I'm pleased that organizations recognize the importance of treating employees with civility, acknowledging gaps, and striving to address them. On the other hand, I'm discouraged by the prevalence of incivility in our society, which inevitably seeps into our workplaces.

Defining civility can be tricky—it's fluid and context-dependent. Take swearing as an example: I might curse freely when I'm alone or with close friends, which is fine, but I refrain from doing so in front of my parents, at work, or in public, which is also fine. This isn't about being insincere; it's about adjusting my behavior for the sake of others and the situation. Not swearing in those contexts doesn't harm me and creates a more pleasant environment for others—a win-win scenario.

When we aim to understand and support others' needs and preferences, we foster an environment where everyone can thrive. If everyone adopts this approach, we all benefit. To help define civility, consider this three-part philosophy:

- **I see you.**
- **I understand your interests, needs, values, priorities, and circumstances are valid, even if they differ from mine.**
- **I won't make things hard for you or impose my interests and values on you.**

So, next time you have the chance to help a short person retrieve something from a high shelf, please do it.