Incivility. Life and death. Success and unproductivity. Who people choose to be and how they treat others means everything.

Christine Porath, a leadership researcher, spoke at a Ted Talk on the consequences of incivility in January 2018.

“Incivility is a bug,” Porath said. “It’s contagious, and we become carriers of it just by being around it. And this isn’t confined to the workplace.”

Porath said this contagion can be dangerous – she gives an example of a doctor who shouted at his team and caused the team to give the wrong dosage of medication to the patient. They missed the information on the chart in front of them. The patient died.

“Medical teams exposed to rudeness perform worse not only in all their diagnostics, but in all the procedures they did,” Porath said. “This was mainly because the teams exposed to rudeness didn’t share information as readily, and they stopped seeking help from their teammates.”

Porath said incivility can be a big deal, as in the case of the doctor. To prevent situations like this, Porath said civility involves more than just not being a jerk. She said not holding someone down isn’t equivalent to lifting someone up.

“Either you lift people up by respecting them, making them feel valued, appreciated and heard, or you hold people down by making them feel small, insulted, disregarded or excluded,” Porath said.

Porath said incivility affects emotions, motivation, performance and treatment of others. It also affects attention to detail and can take brainpower.

“So, if incivility has such a huge cost, why do we still see so much of it?... The number one reason is stress,” Porath said. “People feel overwhelmed. The other reason that people are

not more civil is because they're skeptical and even concerned about being civil or appearing nice. They believe they'll appear less leader-like."

However, Porath said her research shows that civil people are seen as friendly and smart and more likely to be viewed as leaders. Porath also said she found that the No. 1 reason tied to executive failure was insensitivity, abrasiveness and bullying. Porath said her research concluded that what people want most from their leaders is respect.

"Being treated with respect was more important than recognition and appreciation, useful feedback, even opportunities for learning," Porath said. "Those that felt respected were healthier, more focused, more likely to stay with their organization and far more engaged."

Porath said to get these benefits, it doesn't require a huge shift. Small actions can mean the difference between civility and incivility. Porath said thanking people, sharing credit, listening attentively, humbly asking questions, acknowledging others and smiling is impactful.

"Civility lifts people. We'll get people to give more and function at their best if we're civil. Incivility chips away at people and their performance," Porath said. "It robs people of their potential, even if they're just working around it. What I know from my research is that when we have more civil environments, we're more productive, creative, helpful, happy and healthy."

In response to the significance of civility in the workplace, an audience member shares her thoughts.

"It's important because people reflect the environment around them, so negative environments will have a negative impact," Ashley Souza, a Dallas junior, said.

In response to the speech, another audience member shares their opinion.

“I think attitude toward someone can sometimes be more effective than words,” Lauren Boyt, a Midland, Texas, sophomore, said. “So, if someone knows your attitude toward them is respectful, they are more forgiving if you slip up and say something disrespectful.”