

Civil Behavior in Working Group

RTG Area Chairs Discussion and Training

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Agenda

- Why this session?
- What is uncivil behavior?
- What are the openings for being uncivil?
- Who should act, how, and when?
- What is an appropriate resolution?
- What if someone deserves it?
- What if the behavior continues or escalates?
- What are the backstops?
- Discussion

Why are we talking about this?

- WG chairs are responsible to the smooth running of their WG
 - Full and open participation
 - Sound technical input from whatever source
 - No scope for dominance of wrong ideas
- None of us wants to work in an unpleasant environment
- This stuff does happen
- We have a duty of care to others we work with
- You asked the ADs for a session on this topic

“I know it when I see it”

- What is uncivil behavior?
- There are some tests you might apply
 - Would I like it if it was done to me?
 - Would I do it to someone else?
 - How would I feel if it was done to my spouse/child/parent?
 - Does it violate social norms?
 - Is it rude / bullying / bad taste?
 - How might a timid newcomer react if they see it?
- Does it stifle debate
 - Robust debate is good
 - Shutting people down/out is bad

Let me count the ways...

- The IETF is full of opportunities to be uncivil
 - But most (all?) of them are in direct interpersonal communication
 - At the mic in a F2F or virtual meeting
 - In a jabber room
 - In email on a mailing list
- The venue and medium is not important
- What about private interactions?
 - Email related to IETF work?
 - Corridor conversations at IETF meetings
 - This crosses into harassment and is not in scope
 - You cannot control or hope to control how people behave in private
 - You may act as a concerned individual, but not your job as WG chair

We are not the police, but...

- “I’m not sure whether this counts as uncivil...”
- Don’t go hunting for cases of rude or bad behavior, but:
 - Be alert to them
 - Listen very carefully when people complain
- Try not to be embarrassed by the process
 - Treat it as a duty and part of your societal role
- See it as parenting, not policing
- No cliques or favouritism. No special cases or mitigating circumstances.

Do punishments fit the crime?

- Actually we're not here to punish!
- We look for three results
 1. Stop it
 2. Repair damage (apologise)
 3. Show the community that it is not acceptable
- Actions that we might call punishment
 - Public censure, suspend mailing list privileges, etc. (see later)...are all about results 1 and 3
- But people called to account may *feel* punished
 - Need to be sensitive to this, but make no changes

Excuses

- There are often excuses or reasons
 - “I didn’t mean to”
 - “He was being a pain in the gluteus maximus”
 - “She is over-sensitive”
 - “I only responded to provocation”
 - “It was just a joke”
- Often you’ll hear the excuse before you even have a chance to act
- Frequently you’ll have a lot of sympathy with the offender
 - Some people are a pain
 - Some things really are funny
 - Often you know the offender and their “gruff” characteristics
- It will not be easy when someone has been doing this for years and “getting away with it”
- None of this matters!
 - The aims remain
 1. Stop it
 2. Repair damage (apologise)
 3. Show the community that it is not acceptable

Who and When to Act

- We all have a responsibility as members of the community, but:
 - Anarchy is a delicate balance
 - WG chairs have more of a duty
- Dog-training 101 lesson 37...
 - You can only successfully correct a dog's behavior immediately after an event
- If you leave a situation unrectified for a period
 - The offender is more invested in not being corrected
 - Others might pile in
 - Compounding the incivility
 - Escalating through their own attempts to rectify the situation
 - The offended party is more entrenched in their hurt
 - The watching community is more confused
- You don't need an instant response (we are not dogs), but you should be prompt
 - Means you need to listen in meetings!
 - Means you need to read mailing list more than once a week (there are 2 of you)
- It is worth coordinating between chairs to avoid mismatched or excessive actions
 - In advance ("Fred handles all interpersonal issues")
 - Event by event ("I know Harry well, I'll deal with this")
 - But don't let this introduce delays

So What Do You Do?

- Be result driven
 - The ideal is that the offender makes a prompt and full apology
 - Oh, and refrains from future similar behaviour
 - What can you do to make that happen?
- Actions depend on the immediacy / medium
 - Mailing lists are different from microphones
- Be firm, but polite...

Microphone Comments

- These are 87% better handled instantly
 - But it can be hard and adrenaline-fueled

“Let me stop you there. You may not have intended it, but your comment sounded a bit like a personal attack and we don’t do that in the IETF. Can I ask you to apologise for what you just said, and then you can try to make your point again focussing on just the technical content.”

- Left until later, you need to handle it like email...

Mailing lists

- There will often be a time lag
 - Be aware that some offenders will play to this
 - It feels harder to act the more things drag on
 - I recommend an escalating sequence
 - For severe cases you can start later down the sequence
1. Private email

“Your comments in your email of 1st April came across aggressive and may have been upsetting to Fred. Could you please send an apology to the list and try to re-state your technical concerns in a new thread.”
 2. Private warning

“You need to resolve your uncivil behavior on the mailing list. It would be far nicer if you took charge of this, but as chair I should let you know that I must address the situation on the list even if you don’t”
 3. Public correction

“Fred’s email on 1st April slipped below the usual standards we expect on this list. I am asking the working group to avoid similar unnecessary behavior in the future, and I call upon Fred to apologise and restate his concerns focussed solely on the technical issues. This will allow us all to move on with our work.”

Deniers, Excusers, and Wrigglers

- That pretty much covers everyone 😞
- It is possible that your attempts on the previous slides will be met by resistance
 - Sometimes you can handle this through discussion and explanation

“I’m sure you didn’t mean to be offensive when you called her a silly old woman, but I think you really have upset several people. Why not just send an apology such as <suggest text> and then the issue will be closed?”
 - Other times you have to go further...

Bigger sticks

- To be used with care
 - You can only execute someone once
 - It *really* helps to explain to the offender what might be about to happen
 - Aim is to pull back to softer approach
 - Do not threaten!
 - Always describe the appeal path
- Public censure
 - This is a formal email to the offender and on the mailing list

“Your email of 1st April was unacceptable. It was offensive and did not meet the levels of civility expected on this mailing list. A full apology from you would go a long way to mitigate this situation, but I must warn you that a repeat of this behavior will not be tolerated. All participants in this WG are reminded to keep their exchanges polite and professional: focus on technical issues of substance.”
- Suspension of posting rights
 - This is a piece of IETF process that you can use to stop someone posting to your WG mailing list...

PR Actions

- Base process is in BCP 83 : RFC 3683
 - A PR-action identifies one or more individuals, citing messages posted by those individuals to an IETF mailing list, that appear to be abusive of the consensus-driven process.*
- PR Action is sent to the IESG who make a determination based on an IETF last call
 - Get your AD to run with it, just like an I-D going to RFC
 - It can be appealed
 - It can be rescinded any time after 12 months
- Wow, that's heavy, man!
 - Yeah, who wants that amount of process?
- Lighter process is in RFC 3938 (part of BCP 25, alternatively, BCP 94)
 - ...gives WG chairs explicit responsibility for managing WG mailing lists. In particular, it gives WG chairs the authority to temporarily suspend the mailing list posting privileges of disruptive individuals.*
 - As a last resort and typically after one or more explicit warnings and consultation with the responsible Area Director, the WG chair may suspend the mailing list posting privileges of the disruptive individual for a period of not more than 30 days.*
- Use RFC 3938 by preference
 - Easy to implement
 - Appeals are to your AD
 - In any case, read the RFC, it is helpful to set the tone for this discussion

Serial offenders and recidivists

- I am told that bullying is a habit
- Some people are just not very nice
- Being snarky gets attention and is rewarding
- Repeated offences count as more significant offences
 - You can explain to the offender that this is a problem
 - You can enter the process further down the sequence
 - May need to look toward RFC 3683 and RFC 3938

What goes through your head?

- “Fred is a really valuable technical contributor: I don’t want to ban him”
- “Mary will be mortified if I tell her she was rude”
- “Daphne will make personal attacks on me if I tell her off”
- “I’m embarrassed to have to do this”
- “I have better things to do with my time (such as real, technical work)”

- This is why you get paid the big bucks!
- Talk to your AD
 - It is part of a learning process and the ADs are happy to help

Where does the buck stop?

- Hooray, it doesn't stop with you!
- In the first instance the AD is responsible for your actions
 - Making you a better chair
 - Giving you the tools
 - Discussing problems and resolutions
- And best yet, if you screw up, the AD is responsible
 - But that means the AD has expectations about your behavior 😊
- Ultimately, appeals will be about the AD's handling of complaints about your actions
 - That is, you are not the subject of the appeal
- Appeals are, as usual, to the IESG, then the IAB, then ISOC

A word about harassment

- Sometimes you may think the uncivil behavior is or verges on harassment
- draft-farrresnickel-harassment may become an RFC one day
 - Gives a formal process to report possible harassment
- In any case, the Ombudsperson (we have one already) is available and happy to discuss harassment issues with you
 - She may encourage you to use existing mechanisms as already discussed
 - She may say “Whoa, this is bad” and propose to handle it herself

What worries you?

Discuss