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How Purposeful Kindness Can Make You A Better Leader



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Careers



Credit: Getty Images

Listen, there's a sea of serious information available at your fingertips—advice that can make you better at your job, achieve your goals and earn respect. The two of us are consistently buried in this type of information. We dig through many studies we find that focus on topics like: performance, engagement, results, or commitment. We're geeks about charts, data, and graphs that might shed some insight into how leaders can improve their skills. But, still, sometimes it's the simplest message that reveals the most.

Marie Unanue who has given herself the title of Kindness Advocate, recently released a children's book, titled *The Adventures of Phatty and Payaso*. It tells the story of a cat on a mission to stop a bully hawk, and teaches the importance of

kindness, as well as concepts like self-control, grit, and social awareness. Ironically, we thought these are many of the same character skills associated with great leadership. “Bullying is a big problem,” Marie told us. “But, in today’s world, even as adults, the lack of kindness is just as big of problem.”

Of course we view kindness as one quality of leadership. And, you don’t have to look very far to find many stories and articles promoting random acts of kindness. But, this made us wonder; is there any research to prove purposeful kindness makes us better leaders? Yes. There is.

Harvard Business School’s Amy Cuddy, along with her research partners, have [demonstrated](#) that even before establishing their own credibility or competence, leaders who project warmth are more effective than people who lead with toughness. Basically, kindness and warmth appears to accelerate trust.

But, the link between kindness and great leadership extends beyond just the relationship you have with employees. Interestingly enough, it could also increase employee performance.

Consider this. Researchers at Oxford University analyzed hundreds of published papers that studied the relationship between kindness and happiness. They uncovered [21 studies](#) that explicitly prove that being kind to others makes us happier. Add to that research from the University of **Warwick** that [revealed](#) that people are 12 percent more productive at work than unhappy people.

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“Of course we should be teaching children to intentionally practice kindness,” added Marie Unanue, who is now on speaking tour, talking to school children, and building steam behind her kindness movement [letsallbekind.com](#). “But, as adults, we also must be intentional about practicing kindness. Random acts are great. But, let’s not overlook opportunities to be kind on purpose—to make the world a better place, elevate someone’s day, and simply look out for one another.”

Through our work, we’ve had the opportunity to witness some of the best cultures, and meet some of the most prolific leaders in business. Here are four things we’ve found that can help you practice purposeful kindness at work.

1. **Recognize, kindly.** Celebrate the successes of others you work with. Global [research](#), from my own firm, the O.C. Tanner Institute, shows that when employees were asked what their boss or company could do to inspire them to strive for better results, recognition was, hands down, the number one answer. It was bigger than pay increases, promotions, training, and autonomy. Celebrating is kind.
2. **Support, kindly.** We all have busy, stressful lives. Whether you're a leader or an individual contributor there's too much "It's not in my job description" going on, and not enough, "How can I help?" If this piece of advice seems unsettling to you because you already have enough on your plate, realize that the "How can I help" attitude is what gets most people promoted.
3. **Give feedback, kindly.** A 10-year [study](#) by Harvard Business Review shows that the biggest reason second-rate executives don't move up, is their inability to create trusting relationships. As leaders, sometimes we have to tell employees when they're not meeting expectations. Critical conversations are tough, but can actually build trust, if their handled with kindness—meaning you actually have a desire to help an employee become their best, rather than just improving your numbers.
4. **Care, kindly.** The toughest part about leading people is understanding that they are actually people—not machines. They don't turn off when they finish their work. They move on to deal with personal responsibilities, health concerns, relationships, financial issues, and the list could go on. Great leaders understand this, and they care.

Random acts of kindness are important. But, if we want to be great leaders, maybe we shouldn't focus so much on being random, but instead focus on the one thing great leaders intentionally practice, kindness—especially to the people who support our careers each and every day.

We are researchers, consultants and authors inside the O.C. Tanner Institute, and we write about people who make a difference—what they think about, what they do, and how they achieve extraordinary results. David Sturt is executive vice president at the O.C. Tanner Institute... [MORE](#)

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