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KINDNESS *in your* WORKPLACE

A proactive solution for building resilience and engagement

By Olivia McIvor

Do the daily stressors of your work cause you to say or do things that may be “unkind?” Could kindness be a remedy that relieves workplace stress and increases employee engagement? Stress in the workplace can lead to a multitude of issues: high turnover, diminished productivity, health problems, absenteeism, disability claims, lawsuits and, worst of all, workplace aggression.

The World Health Organization calls stress “the health epidemic of the 21st century.” Statistics Canada has calculated that the cost of work time lost to stress amounts to \$20 million annually and that absenteeism is responsible for 15 to 20 per cent of payroll costs.

According to the 2012 Towers Watson *Global Workforce Study*, increased workplace stress leads to increased disengagement. The study, with 32,000 employees participating, offered a snapshot of worker engagement levels. The findings were startling – only 35 per cent of employees felt engaged in their work.

Engagement is a term used widely in leadership circles to define the positive energy employees exhibit toward their work tasks mentally, emotionally and physically. Towers Watson’s research indicated that one core factor affecting engagement was an employee’s ability to manage the daily stressors of their work.

CAN KINDNESS BE A SOLUTION?

Kindness is a simple concept – maybe too simple to provide a solution to the stressors and challenges faced daily at work. Yet, current research suggests that kindness has the power and magnitude to effect change and decrease stress within individuals and organizations.

The American Management Association (AMA) discovered the power of kindness at work when it set out to examine whether a manager’s character had an effect on employee en-

gagement levels and retention. Respondents were asked if they planned to work for their company for a long time. Of those who worked for a manager they considered kind, 79 per cent answered yes; of those who worked for someone they considered unkind, 23 per cent answered yes.

Respondents were also asked if they looked forward to going to work every day; 74 per cent of those who worked for a kind boss answered yes, compared to 32 per cent of those who worked for someone they considered unkind. Overall results showcased that 70 per cent of those working for kind managers gave extra effort to everything they did; whereas those working for a manager they found unkind only gave 54 per cent of what they felt capable of in their work.

Academics at the University of Michigan and Emory University in the U.S., and the University of British Columbia, identified what they referred to as a cascading effect when a worker experiences compassion in the workplace. The researchers found that employee engagement with each other and their work improved when they practiced acts of kindness. They also found that the positive emotions generated by acts of kindness increased job satisfaction, lowered job stress and turnover, and contributed to feelings of wellbeing and psychological safety.

Dr. Jane Dutton, of the University of Michigan School of Business, said, “Our findings suggest that compassion among co-workers is more than simply a momentary, humane response to pain; it fosters important organizational outcomes and leaves its imprint on the organizational landscape.”

KINDNESS TO COLLEAGUES

In South Africa, there is a philosophy referred to as *Ubuntu*, which means, “I am because of who we are.” Desmond Tutu believes that *Ubuntu* is the very essence of what it is to be human.

"You cannot be human all by yourself. When you have this quality – *Ubuntu* – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected, and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity," said Tutu.

Studies and statistics are attention-grabbing, but the real power of kindness emerges in stories of how acts of kindness shape the way in which we connect with what we do and with each other.

Patti loves her work in food service at a small rural hospital. When she makes pancakes for the children's ward, she makes them look like kittens. She says, "If I can take a little more time to make food look special, they [the children] will eat more and get healthier quicker."

When Margaret's home burned to the ground, everything was lost. The gift, Margaret said, was that everyone, including the family pets, escaped without harm. Because she had lived in her community for many years, boxes of clothing, food and sundries arrived daily to help Margaret and her family.

John is a civic employee. When he ran out of paid sick days and short-term disability for an unexpected illness, his colleagues took up a collection and sent it around. However, they were not collecting cash. Instead, they asked for donations of unused sick time in increments over four hours to multiple days. His comrades collected enough for him to take an additional two months off with pay – one heartfelt sick day at a time.

KINDNESS IS GOOD FOR YOU

A kind act can be expressed in a multitude of ways, both concrete and intangible. Research has shown that there are also a multitude of health benefits which flow from doing a good deed. One such benefit is known as "helper's high," a phrase that originated in the late 1980s with Allan Luks, the executive director of the global Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization at that time.

Luks was curious about the side effects of benevolent actions and surveyed 3,000 adult volunteers. When the results came in, 95 per cent said they experienced positive feelings after committing acts of kindness through their volunteer work.

Luks defined "helper's high" as a euphoric feeling, followed by a long period of calm, after performing a kind act. His research indicated that individuals who experience "helper's high" routinely report that they experience fewer colds, an increase in joy and self-esteem, less stress and even less physical pain by the release of the body's endorphins.

Dr. Myriam Mongrain, of York University in Toronto monitored a test group of more than 700 subjects who, for one

week, were asked to do something kind for someone each day in some small way. The participants were interviewed six months later to see if that week of doing good deeds had any lasting effect on them. She found that more than 50 per cent of the participants voluntarily continued doing good deeds because they felt such an improved sense of well-being. Some participants even stated that the experiment had actually changed their lives for the better. Mongrain concluded, "What's amazing is that the time investment required for these changes to occur is so small; we're talking mere minutes a day."

Researchers at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, studied activity in the brain using a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner while subjects helped another person. They found more oxygen flowed to the brain and interestingly, the same area of the brain that was active when a person received an award or experienced pleasure was also active in their subjects.

Dr. Paul J. Zak, Professor at Claremont University, as well as author of *The Moral Molecule*, has done ground-breaking work on how oxytocin affects and benefits us. His studies have shown that when we undertake kind actions, chemical reactions within our bodies take place so that more oxytocin, the hormone that promotes bonding, is produced.

Like a healthy diet, kindness nurtures a sense of wellbeing in individuals. Perhaps we may someday fully understand that it plays a physiological part in our health that is as vital as essential vitamins and minerals.

CREATE A CULTURE OF KINDNESS

Organizations are on a continuous search for ways in which they can hire, train and retain staff, while building strong relationships both within the company and the community. Using kindness as a business driver is a proactive approach aimed at enhancing the well-being of individuals within an organization, and the sustainability and health of the organization itself.

Begin a kindness campaign within your company with programs and activities around the theme of Kindness to Oneself. This theme aims to support self-care and the nurturing of one's health and well-being.

When you are comfortable, you can move on to Kindness to Colleagues. This theme fosters optimistic teamwork and the growth of a caring workplace, one in which colleagues not only see each other for what they do, but also for who they are. Seek out goodwill ambassadors to assist and support you in the journey to a kinder workplace. Find ways to recognize, honour and celebrate the uniqueness of your co-workers.

A quick formula for treating others with respect and kindness is to pause and ask yourself three questions: Is what I am about to say or do truthful? Is it necessary that I say or do it? And, above all else, can I say or do it with kindness?

Ideas for cultivating a culture of kindness might include:

- Creating a “kindness corner” bulletin board or online. Invite people to contribute inspiring thoughts, quotes, suggestions, positive newsworthy events and articles;
- Starting a kindness group that comes together to dialogue and commit conscious acts of kindness in the organization and in the community;
- Holding a Kindness@Work day in conjunction with the annual global World Kindness Day held on November 13;
- Hosting “Lunch and Learn” presentations. This is a great way to foster caring connections between colleagues through the exploration of personal development themes;
- Starting a “Positive Growth” library. Invite colleagues to donate books that brought them joy, self-discovery and learning;
- Linking kindness to recognition, Occupational Health and Safety initiatives and in-house training programs; and
- Opening staff meetings and events with kindness stories and successes.

Kindness in the Community is the natural next step. Take kindness even further and make a difference locally and globally through community service.

THE KINDNESS CHALLENGE

Focusing on kindness as a core value and as a standard for personal decision-making provides a solid foundation from which to recharge and centre oneself. When under pressure within a work environment, we may find it difficult to determine which options available represent the highest level of integrity, trust or innovation, but it is usually quite simple to determine which choice is the most kind to ourselves, our colleagues and our communities.

A quote to contemplate asks, “If someone were to pay you ten cents for every kind word you spoke and collect five cents for every unkind word, would you be richer or poorer?” Take the kindness challenge and in the next 48 hours commit a conscious act of kindness for yourself, a colleague or your community and see how good you feel.



Olivia Mclvor is an international organizational development expert and bestselling author. Her most recent book, *The Business of Kindness*, researches and validates the impact kindness has on progressive workplace cultures.

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