



Short Communication

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Compassion in Leadership: Do You Lead with Heart?

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Abstract

Kindness, perceived as a simple moral virtue, is increasingly supported by scientific evidence as a vital factor for personal well-being, promoting social cohesion, and driving organizational success. When leaders embody kindness, it can spread throughout the organization, enhancing employee productivity, engagement, and retention. In a world marked by division, exhaustion, and fast-paced interactions, cultivating kindness in interpersonal communication has become an essential leadership attribute. Leaders who prioritize kindness can harness the concept of emotional contagion, whereby their positive behaviors influence the emotional climate of the workplace. This helps establish a powerful emotional tone, allowing positivity to flourish and become a defining characteristic of their leadership style. The significance of kindness in mitigating the breakdown of connections and trust caused by lack of focus and rapid interactions in today's disruptive landscape was highlighted at the Global Peter Drucker forum [37]. In this context, kindness emerges as not only a personal virtue but also a strategic approach to navigating the complexities of contemporary organizational dynamics.

Benefits of Leading with Kindness during Heightened Exhaustion and Burnout

In an environment characterized by heightened burnout and declining engagement, organizations could benefit from prioritizing employee retention. DHR Global's the Workforce Trends Report 2025 underscores the prevalence of burnout, with 82% of employees experiencing significant exhaustion [6]. Burnout is further fueled by 81% of employees worried about job insecurity in 2025, encouraging overworking to avoid unemployment. Requests from leaders for employees to take on additional work beyond their job descriptions further fuels the exhaustion by blurring the lines of boundaries and balance. In workplace cultures that promote overwork, many employees may resort to deceptive practices out of fear of being penalized or reprimanded. The Global Leadership Forecast 2025 found that among the 71% of leaders experiencing high stress, more than half are concerned about burnout, and nearly half have considered leaving their roles as a result. This phenomenon, often referred to as "revenge quitting," sees highly skilled employ

ees abruptly resigning as a response to feeling overworked and undervalued.

Additionally, SHRM's Employee Mental Health in 2024 report established a strong connection between burnout and employee turnover, revealing that 45% of burned-out workers are actively seeking new job opportunities [31]. Notably, employees are not solely motivated by higher salaries; rather, many are prioritizing their well-being over workplaces that push them beyond their limits [17].

Studies have demonstrated that employees are more likely to remain in a job where they feel a sense of belonging, are valued, and have supportive and trusting colleagues [1,20,21,25]. Acknowledging and appreciating the contributions of individuals fosters enthusiasm, trust, and loyalty. This recognition not only encourages performance but also has the potential to stimulate creativity and innovation within the organization. Recognition is conditional, performance-based, and "is about what people do; appreciation is



about who they are” or their inherent value as a colleague and human being [35].

Research supports the notion that leading with kindness and compassion yields numerous benefits for the givers and the receivers [4,5,10,18,19,23,24,33,34]. Witnessing kind acts increases the likelihood of performing prosocial behaviors, reinforcing a cycle of generosity [15]. Kindness can potentially break down defensiveness with graciousness. An environment characterized by anger and volatility can inhibit open communication about critical risks and issues, thereby impeding the organization’s ability to respond effectively to crises. By promoting positive conformity—where behaviors that benefit others are imitated and reinforced—leaders can create environments that support mental, emotional, and physical health for everyone involved. Ultimately, studying kindness not only enriches our understanding of human behavior but also offers practical insights into building resilient and compassionate cultures during heightened employee exhaustion and burnout.

Embracing Compassion in Organizational Culture

Like kindness, compassion has been shown to provide meaningful benefits for both those who receive it and those who share it [30]. Neuroimaging research indicates that people’s brains respond more positively to leaders who demonstrate compassion. Research shows that compassionate leadership correlates with higher employee satisfaction, engagement, productivity, and retention rates [7,40]. Instead of thinking “give-to-get,” the data supports a mindset of “live-to-give.” Furthermore, the creation of a compassionate culture has been associated with reduced employee emotional exhaustion and absenteeism [38]. Findings from positive psychology indicate that kindness fosters a sense of purpose and connection, which aligns with effective leadership goals [3,19,27,28] [43].

In a world frequently challenged by stress, isolation, and social conflict, compassion can sometimes seem like an unattainable ideal reserved for spiritual leaders, humanitarian figures, or extraordinary individuals. However, research revealed that compassion and empathy are not just admirable traits; they are fundamental to our well-being, mental health, and social connections [39]. Rather than viewed as a sign of weakness, compassion is deeply rooted in our neurobiology, playing a crucial role in fostering emotional resilience, strengthening communities, and enriching relationships.

Incorporating kindness into leadership practices and organizational culture has the potential to foster resilience, strengthen trust, and enhance overall well-being, thus contributing to a more cohesive and successful work environment. Kindness allows for vision of the bigger picture by shifting from “me” to “we” [25].

The Science and Benefits of Kindness: An Evidence-Based Perspective

Kindness contributes to improved mental and physical well-being [26]. Acts of kindness stimulate the brain’s pleasure and reward centers, generating a “helper’s high” [28]. Witnessing kindness

can trigger the release of oxytocin, which promotes cardiovascular health and reduces stress (UC Berkeley, Greater Good Science Center). Kindness has been demonstrated to elevate self-esteem, empathy, and compassion while contributing to mood improvement [15]. It can notably lower blood pressure and cortisol, a stress hormone that directly influences stress levels.

Additionally, individuals who consistently engage in balanced acts of kindness are inclined to be healthier and lead longer lives [8]. Kindness also enhances individuals’ sense of connectedness with others, directly impacting loneliness while improving mood and relationships in general [23]. Kindness is a powerful brain health booster that can increase resilience and empathy [30]. Furthermore, kindness has the potential to be contagious and, in some cases, actively seeking opportunities to be kind can serve as a focused activity, especially in social situations where anxiety or stress may be present [52].

From a physiological perspective, kindness has a positive impact on the brain. It boosts levels of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters associated with feelings of satisfaction and well-being [29]. This, in turn, activates the pleasure and reward centers in the brain. Additionally, acts of kindness can trigger the release of endorphins, the body’s natural pain relief mechanism [44,48,51]. Cumulative evidence underscores the profound effects of kindness on both physical and mental well-being, offering a compelling incentive to cultivate and prioritize this invaluable aspect of human interaction.

Benefits of Kindness in Leadership

Fostering Trust

The growing leadership credibility crisis reveals that trust in immediate leaders and managers continues to decline - nearly a 40% decline since 2022 [14]. Acts of kindness, such as listening attentively, showing empathy, or offering help, build trust between leaders and their teams [12,13,36]. Trust is foundational for transparent communication, emotional connections, and employee engagement, allowing for flexibility to cultivate loyalty and honesty.

Enhancing Psychological Safety

Kind leadership creates an environment where employees feel safe to express themselves, share ideas, and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or retaliation [16]. Leaders who respond kindly to mistakes encourage innovation and reduce fear-driven behaviors.

Improving Communication

Kindness in communication, such as providing constructive feedback or showing appreciation, ensures that team members feel valued and understood, leading to better interpersonal dynamics [32]. Effective communication fosters a culture of gratitude and mutual respect.

Promoting Employee Well-Being

Kindness supports employees’ mental health and well-being,

reducing stress and burnout by demonstrating genuine care [29].

Cultivating Team Engagement and Morale

Kindness boosts morale and inspires employees to contribute their best. When leaders model kindness, it sets the tone for positive workplace relationships, a sense of belonging, and a shared purpose [11].

Strengthening Emotional Intelligence

Kindness is an element of emotional intelligence (EQ). Leaders with high EQ can navigate interpersonal challenges and foster cohesion [20].

Encouraging Loyalty

Employees are more likely to remain loyal to leaders who exhibit kindness, which can reduce turnover and create a stable, engaged team committed to growth [21,22].

Inspiring Ethical Behavior

Kind leaders model ethical and compassionate behavior, setting a standard that influences the broader organizational culture [2,9]. Leaders who demonstrate fairness and inclusivity encourage similar behaviors among team members.

Conclusion

Kindness is not a soft or secondary leadership trait; it is a strategic tool that drives performance, engagement, and well-being. Leaders who practice kindness are better equipped to navigate challenges, inspire their teams, and create lasting organizational success. As automation and artificial intelligence (AI) transform the workplace, prioritizing genuine kindness over superficial niceness is no longer just beneficial—it is essential. With AI handling routine tasks, we have a notable opportunity to focus on what is fundamentally important and truly matters: empathy, understanding, and authentic human connection. By fostering a culture of kindness, we can drive growth, empower individuals, and create resilient, thriving workplaces. This approach not only enhances employee well-being but also strengthens the foundation of organizational success.

Acknowledgement

I dedicate this article to my mother - the face, the model, and the heart of kindness.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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