

Kindness: An Invaluable Attribute of Effective Leaders

Part I

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In last month's article I described the Stockdale Paradox and what lessons it could teach us about effective leadership, especially during the unprecedented, disruptive times in which we live. I highlighted the importance of individuals in leadership positions exhibiting certain behaviors that enhanced their effectiveness, including honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, realistic optimism, and a belief in the ability of the people they serve to be active participants in solving existing problems. While these may appear to be obvious qualities of effective leaders, unfortunately, not all leaders display them.

In addition, I supported the position that leaders who have the courage to express vulnerability while proposing realistic plans for confronting challenges are perceived as stronger and more relatable than those who resort to bravado—especially when it is obvious to many that such bravado is recruited to mask falsehoods, insecurities, and setbacks that they fail to acknowledge or address.

The theme of effective leadership has been of interest to me for years. This interest is rooted in my belief, which I have advanced in many of my past writings and presentations, that the emotional climate that is cultivated in any kind of organization starts at the top.

This statement should not be interpreted to imply that only individuals in leadership positions are responsible for the emotional climate of an organization but rather to capture the large influence that leaders possess. However, I also believe that almost all members of an organization can play a role whether big or small in determining the emotional atmosphere that exists in their workplace. As leadership expert Kevin Kruse observed, “But half the battle is up to you. You can choose your attitude.” This viewpoint aligns with the concept of “personal control” I have described.

Kruse suggested we reflect upon the following questions regardless of our position in an organization:

“What did I do today to improve communication in my organization?”

“What actions did I take today to learn and grow?”

“Whom did I thank today, and who recognized me?”

An Act of Kindness

I decided to continue to address the theme of leadership in this month’s column after reading an article posted by Harvard Business School (HBS) that was co-authored by Boris Groysberg, a professor at HBS (I cited another article by Groysberg last month) and Susan Seligson, an independent researcher. I was immediately drawn to their article by the title “[Good Leadership Is an Act of Kindness.](#)” I have devoted a number of previous articles, including several recent ones, to the concept of kindness. For instance, this past January I highlighted the outlook of Mister Rogers, who placed being kind at the forefront of his philosophy of life; in [November, 2018](#) I described the beneficial outcome of promoting acts of kindness in schools, including through “kindness clubs.”

In addition, I have long posited that engagement in what I call “contributory” or “charitable” activities and which I view as a representation of kindness is associated with nurturing our own resilience as well as the resilience of those who are the recipients of our kindness. Given the divisiveness, mistrust, and anger that are so prevalent in today’s world, especially in the political arena, I was eager to read an article that identified kindness as an attribute of an effective leader.

Groysberg and Seligson quoted Henry James at the beginning of their piece. “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.” Groysberg noted that as a professor at HBS who teaches courses in leadership, he has been approached by a growing group of students and former students seeking his advice about how to lead during such an unpredictable, stressful time. He observed that as a result of COVID-19 many columns have been written about how best to reinforce and sustain employee engagement and productivity during the pandemic.

Groysberg observed, “Unfortunately, most Management 101 advice does not recognize that in times like these, the manager’s toolkit must expand in ways we haven’t seen before. I believe that the most powerful, fundamental leadership strategy is being largely overlooked. It is, in fact, the most innately human one, be kind. . . . Even if gestures of kindness and compassion were not woven into business as usual before the pandemic, they are essential now and going forward.”

It is not that we are first becoming aware of the significance of leaders conveying compassion and kindness. We have known about the importance of these behaviors for many years. As one example, James Kouzes and Barry Posner in their book *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader's Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others* cited the following insight that was put forth almost four decades earlier from businessman and philanthropist Irwin Federman. “Conventional wisdom has it that management is not a popularity contest. . . . I contend, however, that all things being equal, we will work harder and more effectively for people we like. And we like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel.”

In my work I often refer to the lifelong impact that “seemingly small gestures” or what others have called “micromoments” have. These small gestures might include a brief comment, a smile, a note of appreciation. Groysberg and Seligson stated, “Unfortunately, the notion of kindness in the simplest words and gestures often gets lost when CEOs and managers are in perpetual crisis management mode, struggling with layoffs, remote work technology, market woes, and a range of other frustrating disruptions.”

That Over Which We Have Control

Rather than allow acts of kindness to be overshadowed by negative emotions and behaviors occasioned by the pandemic, we should keep in mind that being kind is actually one activity over which we do have control. In this regard, the Mayo Clinic has recommended that we set a goal to be kinder to others. Research has revealed that engaging in kindness activates that part of the brain that creates pleasure and releases the hormone oxytocin that positively affects our social interactions and emotions.

An organization that shows kindness to its employees has been found to improve the mental health of both its leaders and employees. An article posted on the *Psychology Today* website by Eva Ritvo titled “Can Being Kind Make You a Better Boss?” included the following findings: “Kind bosses have been shown to increase morale, decrease absenteeism, and retain employees longer. Kind bosses may even prolong the lives of their employees by decreasing their stress levels which improves cardiovascular health.” Ritvo’s article was posted two years before the pandemic! As Groysberg and Seligson proposed, kindness is even more imperative at this time.

Two Questions

I have been asked a number of questions related to kindness, empathy, and leadership. Two especially stand out. The first: “If I am kind and compassionate as a leader, is it possible that those whom I lead may perceive these actions as a sign of weakness and take advantage of me?”

I respond by noting a point made above, namely, that leaders who convey empathy and caring are more likely to create a positive work environment and greater productivity than those who do not exhibit these behaviors. I often indicate to leaders that if those you lead are not being responsible or respectful it is not because you are too empathetic. Rather other variables are present, including but not limited to a difficulty in establishing clear expectations and goals, not inviting input, and not holding others accountable for their performance.

Kouzes and Posner addressed this matter when they wrote, “Contrary to the myth of the cold-hearted boss who cares very little about people’s feelings, the highest-performing managers show more warmth and fondness than do the bottom 25 percent.” Groysberg and Seligson provide a similar view: “Great leaders attest that it is not a sign of weakness or relinquishing authority to be consistently kind and to offer encouragement and show genuine interest in employees’ mental well-being in punishing times.”

The second question that I have often been asked is, “Can kindness and empathy be taught and learned?” In answering, I voice my belief that given the unique quality of each child’s inborn temperament, some children have a more difficult time developing empathy and showing compassion than other youngsters. However, even those who face more formidable challenges in developing these attributes can certainly be helped to do so. As psychologist Daniel Goleman reminded us in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, “temperament is not destiny.”

This perspective advanced by Goleman and other child development specialists has been supported by research studies. One example is represented by the work of Richard Davidson and Helen Weng. Davidson is a psychologist, neuroscientist, and founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Weng, also a psychologist and neuroscientist, is now at the University of California at San Francisco. In designing their study they posed the following question, “Can

compassion be trained and learned in adults? Can we become more caring if we practice that mindset?” They discovered that the answer was yes.

In their research, reported in the journal *Psychological Science*, and summarized in an [article published by the University of Wisconsin](#), they trained young adults to engage in compassion meditation, an ancient Buddhist technique to increase caring feelings for people who are suffering. These researchers observed that “people can actually build up their compassion ‘muscle.’” Davidson added that strategies could be also be designed for and implemented with children to help them “learn to be attuned to their own emotions as well as those of others, which may decrease bullying.”

Experiences to Reflect Upon

If you agree that compassion and kindness (a) are signs of strength, not weakness, in a leader, and (b) can be taught and reinforced, think about how you would answer the following questions as you consider strategies to nurture these attributes in yourself:

What are the different ways in which people in leadership positions can convey kindness towards those they lead?

Even if you are not in a leadership position, what are the ways you can convey kindness towards others, whether colleagues, family members, friends, or strangers?

What is one example of an act of kindness for which you were the recipient?
What thoughts and emotions did you experience at that moment?

What is one example of an act of kindness that you directed towards others?
What thoughts and emotions did you experience at that moment?

I have gathered a number of responses to these questions from individuals who have read my work and/or attended my presentations. I plan to describe some of these accounts in next month’s article. In the meantime, if you would like to share your stories of kindness, please email them to me; I look forward to reading them.

Let me conclude by wishing my American readers a peaceful and happy Thanksgiving holiday. Many of us will gather with family and friends on a virtual basis this year and we should not underestimate how important that form of contact will be.

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