

Kindness: An Invaluable Attribute of Effective Leaders

Part II

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My last two articles have addressed the theme of leadership. [In October I described the Stockdale Paradox](#) and the lessons it offered about effective leadership, especially during these uncertain, disruptive times. I spotlighted the following qualities of these leaders: honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, realistic optimism, comfort with expressing vulnerability, and a belief in the ability of the people they serve to be active participants in solving existing problems. I observed that while these may appear to be obvious leadership qualities, not all people in such positions display them.

In last month's column [I cited research that identified another noteworthy behavior of exemplary leaders](#), namely, the expression of kindness. Kindness and compassion nurture a positive, emotionally healthy environment and serve as powerful antidotes to the divisiveness, mistrust, and anger that are all too prevalent in many settings. I have been asked if being empathic and kind might be construed as a sign of weakness. My response is that the practice of kindness is not an invitation for others to take advantage of us. If we allow this behavior to occur it is typically because other factors are operating, including, but not limited to, a difficulty in establishing clear expectations and goals, not inviting input, and being hesitant to hold others accountable for their behavior. If anything, kindness promotes respect and responsibility.

This last statement was supported in an article "[How Purposeful Kindness Can Make You a Better Leader](#)," co-authored by business consultants David Sturt and Todd Nordstrom. They asked if there was "research to prove purposeful kindness makes us better leaders?" Their answer was a definite yes, citing one study conducted by Amy Cuddy at Harvard Business School that found "leaders who project warmth are more effective than people who lead with toughness. Basically, kindness and warmth appear to accelerate trust." A review undertaken at Oxford University of numerous studies of kindness in the workplace found, not surprisingly, that being treated kindly increased happiness and led people to be more productive at work.

Experiences of Kindness: The Impact of Seemingly Small Gestures

In my November article I asked readers to reflect upon the following questions:
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 know that some of the most meaningful moments I have experienced—those that have had a significant, even lifelong impact—were produced by what I label “seemingly small gestures.” As noted in several of my previous columns, others have referred to these as “micromoments.” When positive, they are seen as “microaffirmations,” when negative, “microaggressions.”

I recall with great fondness a very brief note left for me by one of my supervisors when I was a postdoctoral Fellow many years ago at the University of Colorado Medical Center. Earlier that day I had made a presentation at the Department of Psychiatry’s Grand Rounds. At that time I was not accustomed to speaking to a relatively large audience and was quite anxious. The note read, “You did a great job today, Bob.”

It took this supervisor just a few seconds to write the note, and I will always treasure that he did. His action conveyed a significant level of kindness towards and encouragement for a young psychologist struggling to find his path as a mental health professional. I placed the note in my wallet. Perhaps it served as the equivalent of Linus’ security blanket, and it remained in my wallet until frayed beyond repair after years of aging.

I experienced another benefit of the note. Shortly after reading it I thought, “If I ever have the opportunity at some point in my career to contribute to the training of other professionals, I hope I’m able to create a moment similar to the one my supervisor just created for me.” Fortunately, I have had such opportunities and quickly discovered that expressions of kindness and caring benefit not only the recipients of such acts but also those who initiate them.

A Regular Practice by Choice

I hope that most if not all individuals in leadership positions agree that the kind of positive action undertaken by my supervisor should be part of their regular practice. Yet, based on many consultations I have done, I have observed that all-too-often leaders neglect or fail to appreciate the impact of microaffirmations. In an insightful article [“Why Kindness In Business Is No Longer Optional—And What Being Kinder Involves,”](#) business consultant Phi Lewis wrote, “The message is clear: in today’s world of work, kindness is not a luxury, it is a necessity.”

Similar to my highlighting the importance of “seemingly small gestures,” Lewis observed, “Kindness begins (or ends) with everyday interactions. Regardless of our seniority, each of us makes moment-by-moment choices about how kind to be to those around us. And, in the fullness of time, it is those everyday choices that exert influence on corporate behavior—for better or worse.” I believe the word “corporate” can be expanded to any kind of organization, including two with which I am very familiar—mental health agencies and schools.

Lewis emphasized that kindness is reflected in “acts of being considerate and responsive to the needs of others. In doing so, it reflects the essential altruism that underpins all high-functioning organizational cultures. . . . Kindness as a value is hard-edged, practical, and supportive. Kindness should never be mistaken for weakness.”

Lewis proposed that leaders embrace five “C’s” to promote kindness in their organizations. The five include: clarity, candor, compassion, courage, and consistency. It is beyond the scope of this column to go into detail about what each of these five represent. I suggest that you click on the link above to access Lewis’ article. I also recommend the following two articles: [“How to Lead with Positivity”](#) by Matthew X. Joseph and [“There Is Strength in Kindness: Why Kind Leadership Matters”](#) by Emily Marsh.

Illustrations of Acts of Kindness

During my career as a therapist, lecturer, and consultant I have heard many stories involving both positive and negative small (and sometimes not so small) gestures expressed by those in leadership positions. The following are a few illustrations, especially representing the positive gestures given the focus of this article:

A woman informed me that she had been working for a business consulting firm for about two years. She noted that her immediate supervisor for much of that period subscribed to the philosophy, “If people do what they are expected to do, no need to compliment them. But when they don’t do what they are supposed to do or make a mistake, you let them know.”

She added, “And the way she let us know was often through sarcasm filled with biting words in a harsh, angry tone. It was very unpleasant to work for her and I was ready to leave my job, when thankfully she decided to take a position with another firm. That was about four months ago. The person who replaced her has an entirely different approach. Within a couple of weeks, she sent me a note of appreciation for helping her to transition into her new position and for my contribution to the success of a particular project. It was so kind of her to do. I had never received anything resembling that note from my previous supervisor. I’ve given up any plans to leave. It’s so much more comfortable and rewarding to work here now.”

I consulted at a mental health agency in which one of the staff was undergoing treatment for cancer and had reached her maximum number of paid sick days. The head of her program approached Human Resources and arranged to donate a week of his accumulated sick time for this staff member to use. Upon hearing what the administrator had done, many other staff did the same, transferring a week of their sick or vacation time to their colleague battling cancer. Their kindness resulted in her having three additional months of paid time off. This staff member told me, “I don’t even have the words to express the appreciation I have for what the director of my program set in motion.”

Just as I was writing this section of my article, I received an email from my daughter-in-law, Dr. Suzanne Brooks, a psychologist at Weston Middle School (Weston is a suburb of Boston). Talk about timing! Suzanne wrote that she didn’t know if I had finished my December article as yet, but if not she wanted to tell me about Phil Oates, the assistant principal at her school. Her description of Phil so resonated with my writings about effective leaders that I immediately made the decision to include him in this article.

Suzanne stated, “Phil is one of the most positive people I know. He brings people together in a way that is wonderful to witness. He leads without ever being controlling. He the opposite of arrogant. He doesn’t pretend to be perfect, regularly encourages input

from staff, and changes course if something isn't working. Phil can be 'goofy' and when the occasion calls for it, has come to school dressed in a superhero costume and smurf socks. Phil routinely high fives students as he passes them in the hallway (pre-COVID of course) and doesn't hesitate to use funny one-liners.

“On a regular basis Phil sends emails to his staff telling them how proud and appreciative he is of them, and at staff meetings he often honors one staff member who he feels has gone above and beyond. He shows videos with catchy and inspiring music along with his words of gratitude. Phil always listens and supports staff. And he is not afraid to confront difficult issues. After the George Floyd murder, one of our staff expressed concern that we hadn't been responding to the event in a timely manner. Phil called a staff meeting, and in the most heartfelt and authentic manner said, 'I am sorry. It's not okay that I didn't talk about this sooner. I can do better. We can do better.'”

Suzanne's use of the word “goofiness” captured an attribute of successful leaders that should not be overlooked—an ability to use humor and be comfortable laughing at oneself. I have often asserted that we must not lose our capacity to be playful and child-like at times, which is very different from being childish. The photo appearing at the top of this article is of Phil with school psychologist Maryellen Stampfli and special education teacher Helen Sousounis displaying the holiday spirit during “wear your festive pajamas day” for staff. It is not an event held during “typical” years but introduced this year with a goal of lifting people's spirits.

Suzanne included emails Phil sent to staff such as, “Amazing job again this week. Our students are so lucky to have you as their teachers” and to students, “I can't thank you enough for all of your hard work this week. We did it!” Phil regularly posts notes of appreciation for the school community, including ways in which students have been involved in what I call “charitable activities.” He also posts some humorous YouTube clips to complement his messages.

What I have learned, especially as I provide webinars for various schools and school districts, is that there are many school administrators and their staffs throughout the United States and other countries who are doing impressive work during very challenging, unprecedented, unpredictable times. I have spoken with administrators who are acutely aware, as Phil Oates is, that one of their main responsibilities is to promote

the well-being of their staff and students in order to create effective, safe learning environments. I applaud the efforts of these school leaders as well as leaders in all different kinds of organizations who model qualities that enrich the lives of their staffs and, in turn, the people their organizations serve.

2021 Awaits Us

When I wished others a Happy New Year last December, none of us could have imagined or predicted what awaited us in just a couple of months. It has been an extremely difficult, sad, anxiety-filled year with so many experiencing firsthand the loss or serious illness of a loved one from the coronavirus. Racial unrest and injustice, financial and food insecurity, and political anger and polarization have been relentless forces, leaving many with a feeling of helplessness and despair.

I am fully aware that simply turning our calendars to 2021 will not magically end the many problems we face. On January 1 we will begin the new year confronted by many challenges. My hope is that as the year progresses the COVID vaccines will prove to be very effective, that we will continue to display resilience of the human spirit, that people hit hard by economic turmoil will experience needed relief, that divisiveness will give way to what this month's article highlights—the power of kindness and compassion. Hope resides within our positive connections with and respect for others.

I wish you all a peaceful, healthy, happy, and safe holiday season.

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