

Small acts of kindness

Hattie Buggy offers an alternative route to maximising engagement

When you think of business, kindness is not the first trait that comes to mind. The benefits of kindness, however, have the power

to transform an organisation and enrich the lives of its employees. Kindness has consequences that go far beyond warm feelings. By creating a kindness culture in the workplace, stress is reduced, relationships are fostered, health is increased and ultimately engagement is encouraged. And with the Mental Health Foundation's survey illustrating that 76 per cent of respondents think society is becoming more materialistic and selfish¹, kindness in the workplace is more essential than ever.

The Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study noted that "employee disengagement is a global epidemic"². It shows that only one in seven employees worldwide are maximally engaged at work and strive to excel for their company. It proposes that this trend could be reversed by instilling pride and meaning in one's work. Kindness is monumental in fostering these characteristics.

Kindness gives way for corporate reward and recognition programmes, which act as incentives for productivity and engagement. For example, Coca Cola carries out twice-yearly rewards in some offices for →





employees who make significant contributions to the company and the communities in which they work. Furthermore, Scottrade has set up a formal 'Above and Beyond' programme in which employees nominate each other to receive congratulatory e-cards, certificates and team awards for excellent work. Receiving such a congratulatory reward improves morale for the individual receiver, and also gives each employee a feeling of meaning and pride in their work. Meaning fosters the motivation to excel, and ultimately increases levels of engagement. Therefore, kindness to your colleagues by complimenting their work or setting up reward schemes can work wonders on their ultimate engagement.

Battling stress – kindness and the calm and productive workforce

With the advancement of the technological workforce, employees are less able to disconnect from work than ever before. Telephones and laptops encourage longer hours and make it increasingly difficult to separate work life from personal life. No wonder work-related stress levels are at an all-time high³!

Stress can disable creativity, discourage effective team work and reduce levels of flexible thinking. Three key components of workforce engagement, therefore, are hindered by stressful corporate environments. Kind acts, no matter how small, have the power to counter these negative characteristics of stress. Whether performed, received or observed, kindness releases endorphins in the body which reduce stress levels. Therefore, kindness in the workplace has a monumental role to play in moderating stress levels.

A less stressed workforce promotes health, wellbeing and a focused mind. This enhances opportunities for engagement and productivity. As some 200m working days are lost annually to stress⁴, by battling it at a hormonal level, kindness can play a direct role in reducing absenteeism.

Relationships and morale – the environment for success

Good professional relationships and co-operation are key to maximising efficiency, creativity and engagement. Simple acts of kindness are believed to be vital in promoting relationships and allowing humans to live together in harmony. A kind and respectful society, be that in the community or in the office, encourages human beings to collectively thrive. Therefore, without kindness at the root of a company, that new open-plan office or those team building initiatives have a limited impact.

As well as fostering relationships on an emotional level, kindness has a biological impact. When kindness involves interaction with another person, the brain releases a hormone called oxytocin, which strengthens bonds and makes us feel more connected. Therefore, kindness has a multi-level effect on our professional relationships and, ultimately, the productivity of an entire team.

Moreover, kindness fosters loyalty (and vice versa). Loyalty to a company is sure to create the best and brightest workforce. Loyal colleagues maximally engage in their work and strive to push the company forward. One way kindness can promote loyalty is via corporate rewards. Michael C Fina gives rewards and acknowledgement for long service. Recognising loyalty is a kind act that makes the receiver feel pride in, and thus engage with, his work.

Meeting employee demands with kindness

A satisfied workforce is an effective workforce. The demands of employees are changing and a workplace needs to offer more than ever before to satisfy them. Studies show that people expect their work to serve as a noble cause, to foster personal growth, to have a community and to be trustworthy⁵. This highlights the move towards a kinder and more caring workplace – kindness is no longer a ‘fluffy’ concept in business, but a vital cog in the corporate machine.

Kindness is essential to ensure employee satisfaction, and therefore maximum engagement. For example, kindness to the community, via charitable, environmental or social responsibility programmes, may increase the ‘noble cause’ demand of an employee: Marks and Spencer, for example, released a Christmas range that supported the housing charity Shelter. Virgin Media carries out an annual National Charity Day to help more than 100 charitable organisations. These good deeds have an impact on both employee satisfaction and client observations of the brand. And by complimenting, praising, and constructively directing colleagues, they will feel a sense of personal growth and development. So kindness can tackle a wealth of workplace necessities.

Nothing develops satisfaction like a good old-fashioned thank-you! The US supermarket Wegmans sent personal thank-you notes to its employees’ homes after an effortful system-change in its offices. This small act of kindness may well have contributed to it being ranked number five in the Top 100 Employers to Work For list that year. Kindness has a role to play in employees’

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satisfaction and, therefore, their pride, effort and engagement.

Why kindness?

Kindness is contagious! One small act of kindness can ripple throughout the entire company. Researchers at Cambridge University found that witnessing a kind act inspires altruistic behaviour in the observer⁶. Therefore, kindness is an easy concept to spread throughout an organisation.

Kindness is the simplest of concepts that can bind a workplace. If in a rush to make a decision or if placed into a difficult encounter, kindness can be a default characteristic to revert to. Unlike more complex virtues such as integrity or innovation, kindness needs no training. We are all intrinsically aware of what kindness is and what a good deed looks like. Therefore, kindness is a simple but effective backbone to a company, and can be adopted by each and every colleague regardless of their ability, background or status.

How to inject kindness into your workplace

We have seen how kindness benefits stress, working relationships, productivity and morale. But how can you start a kindness initiative in your workplace?

It is important to remember that kindness doesn’t mean ignoring numbers, being a weak leader or dismissing accountability. Instead, it is a straightforward concept to drive commitment and engagement. It is simply respecting, valuing and supporting employees and proving that the company is worth their time and effort. Furthermore, kindness can leak out to encourage not only the staff, but their clients and the society in which they dwell.

Here are six ways to bring kindness to your workplace:

- **lead by example** The book *Leading with Kindness* by William Baker and Michael O’Malley outlines

References

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- 3 *ibid*
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- 5 Izzo J B, Withers P *Values Shift: The New Work Ethic & What it Means for Business* Fairwinds Press (2001)



Whether performed, received or observed, kindness releases endorphins in the body which reduce stress levels

6 Schnall S, Roper J, Fessler D M T "Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior" *Psychological Science* 21 (2010)

six characteristics of a kind manager: compassion, integrity, gratitude, authenticity, humility and humour. Just focusing on one of these values could have a positive impact on the organisation. They state that these kind management styles improve employee productivity and engagement, and consequently increase profits

- **support** Respect, support and compassion work wonders in creating a workforce in which employees strive to excel and give their all. These things need not cost money or even much effort – simply complimenting a fellow colleague or giving a reward certificate for outstanding work can raise morale and, ultimately, engagement. Opening up to fellow colleagues and providing one-to-one time for them to air their concerns is a great way to reduce tensions and free mental and emotional resources for maximum engagement
- **boost morale** Communicate with your colleagues about what makes the organisation great, how it brings value to the community and how the employees make this all happen. Recognising each employee's efforts is a simple act of kindness that gives meaning to their work
- **charity and corporate social responsibility** By supporting community, environmental or global causes, staff will feel proud of their workplace. Performing good deeds at work such as charity fundraising days or environmental campaigns makes employees feel motivated and encouraged by their role
- **simple gestures** If more colourful ideas are welcomed, leave chocolate bars (or fruit for the health-conscious office) on the desks of colleagues, or hand them out to couriers like the event management company Theme

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Traders does. As I said above, kindness has beneficial effects whether performed, received or observed, and so this simple idea can have companywide benefits. One Theme Traders employee said that "it's a delight to see their faces when they are handed the unexpected treat... I feel proud that we are sending couriers on their way in a happier and safer mind set". This shows that kindness has an impact on pride and influences more than just the receiver

- **celebrate** Acknowledge good work and milestones reached. Even celebrate employees' birthdays and company anniversaries. For example, the UKRD Group, which tops the *Times*' 100 Best Companies To Work For list, sets aside a 'cuddling budget' for get-togethers and thank-yous, proving that kind acts go a long way in promoting employee satisfaction.

Summing up – the kind workplace

We have seen how kindness has a positive impact on a company's individual employees, its teams as a whole and its profitability. By having an impact on engagement, kindness has the power to transform an organisation. No longer viewed as a weak or 'fluffy' concept, kindness is an integral part of many organisations' operations, and is leaking into management styles worldwide.

How about trying one act of kindness each day in your own workplace? You'll be amazed by its reception and impact. **TJ**

