



Kind Colleagues MONTH 6

Courage to Be Kind

How can we be kind in tough situations?

Consider This

Research from organizational psychologists shows the value of a workplace culture that clearly prioritizes compassion. Researchers Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, and Kanov found that when compassion is a valued principle, it spreads throughout the culture. A compassionate workplace is one that “lessens the immediate suffering of those directly affected by trauma.” Prioritizing compassion positions staffers to recuperate in a healthy and supported way. A compassionate workplace also strengthens employees’ attachment to colleagues and the organization overall. As Dutton and colleagues write, “For those who witness or participate in acts of compassion, the effect is just as great—caring gestures contribute to people’s own resilience and attachment . . . a leader’s ability to enable a compassionate response throughout a company directly affects the organization’s ability to maintain high performance in difficult times. It fosters a company’s capacity to heal, to learn, to adapt, and to excel” (2002).

Kind Leaders

Set up a committee of staff members who are interested in supporting your Kind Colleagues community. Celebrate co-workers’ birthdays and other milestones by circulating cards and providing special treats. Encourage one another through times of grief via comforting cards, meals, coffee dates, walks, etc. Welcome new employees to your kind workplace. Introduce them to co-workers, and engage them in Kind Colleagues activities. Come up with a protocol for incorporating public recognition into your staff meetings so that people feel acknowledged for their accomplishments and contributions.

Developing Awareness

Complaining and Blaming: We all complain—it’s a normal part of our experience. But psychologist Guy Winch cautions that complaining can harm our health. When we get stuck in a loop of complaining, venting, and feeling powerless to change anything, it can lower our self-esteem and make us feel mistreated. The key is to complain effectively, which means staying focused on solving problems, processing information, and coming up with viable solutions. Complaining effectively actually benefits our mental health, Winch has found (2012). Complaining can easily turn into blaming—searching for someone or something to hold responsible for an action, a lack of action, or a frustration or a hurt. Professor Brené Brown concludes, “blame is simply the discharging of pain and discomfort. We blame when we’re uncomfortable . . . vulnerable, angry, hurt, in shame, grieving. There’s nothing productive about blame” (2015). So while it’s normal to blame, when we build self-awareness around this impulse, we hold ourselves accountable and create better solutions to problems. We can begin to address our impulses to complain and blame through mindfulness (or Kind Mind) and self-kindness practices, and then encourage members of our communities to do the same.



Kind Environment

Our Kind Workplace: On a wall or bulletin board in your workplace, hang a large poster entitled “What Kindness Looks Like at [your organization name].” In the middle of the paper, draw a circle with the name of your workplace/organization, or get creative and use your logo, a sketch of your building, or another symbol. Brainstorm a list of all the people involved in your work community—employees, interns, volunteers, customers, clients, etc. Be as detailed as possible. Then add these people to the poster, with lines connecting them to your workplace, and to one another. Allow space for additional people/groups to be added to the poster. Hang the poster in a common area with markers available for colleagues to contribute.

 **The Kind Mind**

Bracelet Exercise: Encourage all staff and faculty members to wear a Ben’s Bells bracelet—or any kind of bracelet or rubber band—and agree to participate in an experiment. (Ben’s Bells bracelets are available at <https://shop.bensbells.org/be-kind-step-up-bracelet.html>.) At a staff meeting, talk about the idea of the unconscious brain vs. the conscious brain. The unconscious brain, often called the reptile/lizard brain, guides our instinctual actions and reactions, while the conscious brain, or the thinking brain, guides our thoughtful, deliberate responses. (See also Kind Colleagues Month 3.) Challenge one another to notice when your reptile brain reacts; when it does, move your bracelet to the other wrist. For instance, you might want to focus on your reactions to complaining, self-criticism, or anger. In noticing our reactions, we give ourselves the opportunity to move into consciousness, where we can choose to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively. Share experiences during staff meetings.

 **Self–Kindness**

A mountain of research exists about the importance of sleep. For instance, research shows that sleep deprivation has a negative impact on quality of life, attention span, memory, and cognitive functions (Alhola & Polo-Kantola, 2007). After meeting with scientists and doctors, Ariana Huffington concluded, “The way to a more productive, more inspired, more joyful life is getting enough sleep” (2010). Practicing kindness is certainly more difficult when you’re sleep-deprived! Spend some time researching and discussing with colleagues the fundamental need for quality sleep, and commit to making sleep a priority. Work together as a staff to create an environment that values a good night’s sleep and its ability to boost productivity, improve brain function, and improve overall mood for staffers. After all, “A loss of sleep not only impairs employees’ moods and diet, but also hinders productivity, creativity, and decision-making” (Raphael, 2016).



Social Kindness

Researchers acknowledge that our work environment needs to be a kind space where we are comfortable being vulnerable, so that staff members can take risks, present innovative ideas, and solve problems creatively (Brown, 2012). This month, set aside time for your Kind Leadership team to lead small group discussions around the challenges to showing vulnerability in your specific field. Think about ways you can counteract that impulse in your workspace by valuing the qualities that vulnerability empowers, such as courage, compassion, and connection (Brown 2010). Then present “Courage to be Kind” awards to colleagues who are willing to make themselves vulnerable in order to connect with and support others, and to lead with kindness. Honor staff members with these awards at a staff meeting, or acknowledge outstanding employees in an organizational newsletter. Emphasize that it takes great courage to be kind, and that meanness and indifference actually come from our fear response.



Kindness in Action

BENevolent Brigade: Organize a community activity this month that helps your staff members connect to the larger community. Call it the “BENevolent Brigade,” or create your own name. Brainstorm different places in your larger community that your organization would like to support (food banks, animal shelters, or even a local family in need). Connect with your selected organization, or look online to see what items are on its wish list. The Kind Leadership Team then shares the wish list of the chosen organization with staff members. Encourage everyone to bring in items on the wish list, or provide information on how they can volunteer with the organization. Deliver items at the end of the month.

Kind Dialogue

Kind Communication: The language we use in professional contexts profoundly impacts how a message is received. This is especially true when we’re dealing with conflict, expressing appreciation for a staff member’s contribution, or letting an employee know some difficult or challenging news. Before this month’s Kind Dialogue practice, have teams brainstorm some of the things we say to one another when we’re reacting from our reptile/lizard brain in anger or frustration (e.g., “That’s a terrible idea!” “Stop being so bossy!” “He’s a bully!”). List as many phrases as possible, then work through the list and try to reframe each one using language that’s less defensive and more focused on kindness. Next, practice kind responses to such initial reactions (e.g., “Let’s remember to practice our kind communication in this meeting” or “Would you try reframing that comment?”). Work together to practice protocols that help staffers practice shifting from the reptile/lizard brain to the higher-level thinking and empathetic brain.