



Kind Colleagues

Month 3: Allowing Time for Kindness



Question of the Month

Why should we make time to practice kindness? What does it take to commit to a kindness practice?

Kind Colleagues Week 1

Kindness Requires Skill: In order to make kindness part of our daily lives, it's important to remember that kindness can require skill, and that, like all skills, it takes practice and upkeep. Allowing ourselves the time to do this work means keeping kindness front of mind so that it becomes a natural part of our everyday lives and environment. Dr. Lauren C. Howe notes that, "People may believe that their weaknesses will be lost over time, but that their strengths are there to stay. Because of this, we might not be very motivated to work on our strengths. Imagine a person who feels that they are a particularly kind person, and that this will never change. They might not take the time to cultivate kindness even further—for instance, to go out of their way to volunteer or help other people. Perhaps this person would instead let these habits slide, and—secure in their "kindness"—would actually become less kind over time. If we don't actively engage with our strengths, we might see them fade."¹ As kindness becomes one of our strengths, the benefits and impact are a continuing journey rather than a finite set of expertise. Remind staff that kindness is not always easy; it takes practice, and that's OK!

Kind Colleagues Week 2: Self-Kindness

Mindful Listening: Careful listening is difficult, but we can develop mindful listening skills with simple practice. Mindful listening asks us to be in the present moment and focus on what the other person is saying rather than being quick to offer our own take or letting our minds wander to something else. Dr. Elizabeth Dorrance Hall recommends “showing interest and support through maintaining eye contact, nodding, smiling, and encouraging [the speaker] to express their thoughts” as well as “giv[ing] others the space to share without interrupting, advising, or correcting them.”² One study found that “high-quality (i.e., empathic, attentive, and nonjudgmental) listening reduces speakers’ social anxiety and leads them to delve deeper into greater self-awareness,”³ leading to more open-minded conversations. Focusing on how we listen contributes to healthier and more constructive communication and is a valuable part of our kindness practice.



Kind Colleagues Week 3: Kindness in Action: Everyday Practices

Take a break: Encourage staff to use their break and lunchtime to really take a break from work and renew their energy. Share ideas on how to “take a break” to emphasize this is a priority in your workplace culture. Ideas include:

- Unplug: Take a break from all devices (computers, phones, tablets, etc.)
- Read: Read for pleasure or flip through a fun magazine
- Get outside: Encourage staff members to take their breaks in the fresh air
- Check in with a friend: Make your friend’s day and enjoy the benefits of your kind act

In addition to being kind to our bodies and minds, taking a brief break can be one of the best things we can do to improve our productivity. This may seem counterintuitive—it’s easy to feel like there’s not enough time to take a break, or that it will slow our momentum. But research indicates the opposite. When we focus on a single task for a prolonged period of time, it’s natural to lose focus as our attention and intellectual resources diminish. Taking a short break and then returning to the task (“goal reactivation”) improves our focus, attention, and performance, which allows us to continue to engage in sustained mental efforts.⁴



Kind Colleagues Week 4: Kindness in Action: Everyday Practices

Kind Problem Solving: Emphasize that your workplace values using kind problem-solving skills at individual, team, and organization-wide levels. Doing so is an effective method of communication, and it’s also a way to treat ourselves kindly. Encourage staff members to take a moment to pause, breathe, and think before responding in difficult situations, which helps improve self-control and strengthens relationships with others. If the problem involves a colleague, suggest imagining where that person might be coming from, or how they might like to be treated. One expert notes, “Increased empathy levels have been directly correlated to increased job satisfaction, improved individual and team performance, and reduced conflict.”⁵

In one-on-one discussions or team meetings, discuss how feeling threatened, scared, or upset are normal human reactions—and how it can be hard to acknowledge that in professional settings. Remind staff that practicing intentional kindness helps us negotiate and accurately identify our feelings while also treating ourselves gently.

Additional Activities

Kind Leadership: Lack of appropriate work-life balance can quickly lead to burnout, and it's up to leadership to build an environment where balance can be achieved and employees can thrive.⁶ According to the American Psychological Association, companies without systems to support the well-being of their employees have higher turnover, lower productivity, and higher healthcare costs.⁷ Remember that the kind approach to finding balance might not mean dividing the hours in a day evenly between work and personal life. Instead, it should focus on having the flexibility to get things done in professional life while still having time and energy to enjoy personal life. Balance is about making time at the right time. Encourage employees to set boundaries, use vacation days, spend time with family, prioritize their health, and take advantage of flexible work options. "Employers who are committed to providing environments that support work-life balance for their employees can save on costs, experience fewer cases of absenteeism, and enjoy a more loyal and productive workforce,"⁸ making it a strong contributing factor to creating a kind workplace.



Kindness at Home

It can be difficult to find the time to practice kindness at home so that it becomes a part of our daily lives. Try finding a time when family members are together, such as while commuting or mealtime, and ask each person to share a kind act they did or witnessed. This short activity done at the same time each day can become an enjoyable part of the routine at home, and can create connections through sharing and reflection. It can also be done as an individual using a journal. Or, suggest participants create a gratitude jar at home where anyone can write down something they're grateful for at any time. Watch the jar fill with slips of paper and read a few notes of gratitude together or individually whenever convenient.



References

1. Howe, L.C. (2016, May 24). *A Self-Improvement Secret: Work on Strengths*. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-self-improvement-secret-work-on-strengths/>.
2. Hall, E.D. (2017, Mar 31). *Mindful Listening: Using empathy to listen instead of offering advice*. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conscious-communication/201703/mindful-listening>.
3. Itzchakov, G. (2018). "The Listener Sets the Tone: High-Quality Listening Increases Attitude Clarity and Behavior-Intention Consequences." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol 44, Issue 5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167217747874>.
4. Ariga, A., & Lleras, A. (2011). "Brief and rare mental 'breaks' keep you focused: Deactivation and reactivation of task goals preempt vigilance decrements." *Cognition*, 118(3), 439-443. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21211793/>.
5. Shurson, J. (2008). "Empathy as a Path to Develop Prosocial and Personal Intelligence Behaviors in U.S. Workplace Adults." *Alliant International University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, 10788422.
6. Moss, J. (2019, Dec 11). *Burnout Is About Your Workplace, Not Your People*. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/12/burnout-is-about-your-workplace-not-your-people>.
7. American Psychological Association (2015). *Stress in America: Paying with our Health*. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2014/stress-report.pdf>.
8. Chancey, C. (cited Sanfilippo, M., 2022, Oct 24). *How to Improve Your Work-Life Balance Today*. *Business News Daily*. <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/5244-improve-work-life-balance-today.html>.