



## Kind Colleagues Month 10: Kindness and Vulnerability



### Question of the Month

What does vulnerability have to do with kindness? In what ways do we need to be vulnerable in order to be kind?

### Kind Colleagues Week 1

**Loneliness:** Technology allows us to stay connected 24 hours a day, yet there's a growing loneliness epidemic in our country. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy reports in Harvard Business Review that recent polls reveal more than 40% of adults experience loneliness, with over half of CEOs and many employees experiencing loneliness at work. He writes, "from a biological perspective, we evolved to be social creatures. Long ago, our ability to build relationships of trust and cooperation helped increase our chances of having a stable food supply and more consistent protection from predators. Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system such that the absence of such a protective force creates a stress state in the body." When our social connections at work are strong, we use fewer sick days, report fewer injuries, feel higher work engagement, and create better work.<sup>1</sup> Feelings of loneliness lower our self-esteem and make us less productive, whereas feeling connected at work empowers us to self-advocate and contribute to a positive work culture. We can mediate feelings of loneliness at work by creating opportunities for staff members to connect, innovate, and be vulnerable. When we create a work culture that values strong social connections, we not only improve performance, we create an environment that has positive effects on the health of our colleagues.

## Kind Colleagues Week 2: Self-Kindness

**Asking for Help:** Asking for help when we need it, in the workplace or in other areas of our lives, is a kind way to treat ourselves when we're overwhelmed or facing difficulties with a project. It requires vulnerability to admit we need help, but rather than thinking we're burdening the other person, we might instead frame it as an opportunity to collaborate, share ideas, and ultimately boost happiness in our helper.<sup>2</sup> Social psychologist Xuan Zhao notes, "Asking for help enables kindness and unlocks opportunities for positive social connections. It can also create emotional closeness when you realize someone trusts you enough to share their vulnerabilities, and by working together toward a shared goal."<sup>3</sup> We can see it as an invitation for them to practice kindness towards us. Ask staff to write down an example of the last time they helped someone. How did it make them feel? Next, have them write down an example of the last time they asked for help. What was the response? If positive, how did receiving the help make them feel? Discuss why asking for help when needed is a form of self-kindness, and work to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable speaking up.



## Kind Colleagues Week 3: Kindness in Action: Everyday Practices

**Share an Experience:** During a group meeting, try this team-building activity that encourages staff members to share an experience. Have each person share an example of a time in their lives when it was difficult to be kind. What did they learn from this experience? Did they respond in a kind way to this challenge, or was it an opportunity to learn from their behavior and work to do better next time? Repeat the exercise with examples of when it was difficult to be kind at work. We know that difficult situations will arise in life and in the workplace, and that our kindness practice gives us the tools to react in a healthy way. Sharing experiences and being vulnerable with our coworkers sets a positive example of learning from past mistakes and builds trust among teams. As Professor Jeffrey Polzer puts it, "Being vulnerable gets the static out of the way and lets us do the job together, without worrying or hesitating. It lets us work as one unit."<sup>4</sup>



## Kind Colleagues Week 4: Kindness in Action: Everyday Practices

**Effective Apologies:** Intellectually, we know that all humans make mistakes. But, in our perfectionistic society, there's pressure to always be right. That can make for people who don't know how to admit they're wrong, or how to apologize when they are. Learning to apologize sincerely is a powerful kindness skill. Professor Amy C. Edmondson explains that "in the workplace, genuine apologies help create a climate in which employees feel safe enough to share things that might be mission-critical, whether that is bad news about a project or even an error of their own."<sup>5</sup> Apologies also show that you value relationships and the point of view of your coworkers.<sup>6</sup> Practice acknowledging mistakes this month by following psychologist Guy Winch's advice for effective apologies.<sup>7</sup> This includes clearly stating "I'm sorry," as well as keeping the focus on the apology itself, rather than creating a dynamic in which the apologizer needs to be comforted. Set aside time for individuals or small teams to practice effective apologies, perhaps using I'm Sorry Notes as a tool.



**I'm Sorry Notes**  
English · Spanish



## Additional Activities

### Kind Leadership

It's not always easy to give feedback, particularly when speaking about projects not completed or expectations not met. It's important to keep in mind however that feedback can guide growth, especially when we avoid being vague or confusing, and assure the feedback is actionable. When it comes to providing feedback, Brené Brown notes that "Clear is kind." She states that, "Feeding people half-truths to make them feel better (which is almost always about making ourselves feel more comfortable) is unkind. Not getting clear with a colleague about your expectations because it feels too hard, yet holding them accountable or blaming them for not delivering is unkind. Talking about people rather than to them is unkind."<sup>8</sup> Many of us avoid difficult conversations, believing we're doing so out of kindness. But if we're actually being kind, then we'll talk to someone directly, with compassion and vulnerability. When given regularly and with kindness, feedback can be a tool for the growth and learning that leads to improved performance. And feedback does not always mean something negative or difficult. Regularly checking in with employees about the positive aspects of their performance, and engaging in employee recognition, can be meaningful and create connections.

### Kindness at Home

Self-reflection is part of being open to the learning that can come from being vulnerable. Encourage staff to keep a journal at home where they reflect on difficult situations faced at work, challenging projects, and what they've gained from their kindness practice. Prompts may include: When was doing the kind thing hard? Are you self-critical, where do those thoughts come from, and are they helpful? What have you learned from a situation you wished had gone differently? When was the last time you asked for help when you needed it? Engaging in written reflection offers a range of benefits, such as a boost in mindfulness, memory, and communication skills, and can even lead to better sleep, a stronger immune system, more self-confidence, and a higher I.Q.<sup>9</sup>



## References

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