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Managing People

Don't Underestimate the Power of Kindness at Work

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Everybody wants to be happy. But how can we meet that sometimes elusive goal? This was a difficult question even before the global pandemic, but nowadays just thinking about it can seem futile. Parents are trying to balance the demands of remote work and online schooling; people who live alone try to keep their focus in isolation. When life is measured by back-to-back Zoom meetings, even taking a shower can seem like a win.

The transformation of the workplace into scheduled online meetings has led to another source of deprivation: The removal of serendipitous encounters. For many people, hearing a colleague say, “Thank you so much” in the hallway, or a manager telling you “Great job” after a presentation were a highlight of office life. Now, these seem like traditions from another lifetime. Without water cooler interactions, casual lunches, and coffee breaks with colleagues, we don’t have the same opportunities for social connection as before. Without them, it can be much harder to find joy in our work. So, what can we do about it?

We offer a humble suggestion: Kindness. This past year, most management advice has focused on how to sustain productivity during the pandemic, yet the power of kindness has been largely overlooked. Practicing kindness by giving compliments and recognition has the power to transform our remote workplace.

The Benefits of Kindness

A commitment to be kind can bring many important benefits. First, and perhaps most obviously, practicing kindness will be immensely helpful to our colleagues. Being recognized at work helps reduce employee burnout and absenteeism, and improves employee well-being, Gallup finds year after year in its surveys of U.S. workers. Receiving a compliment, words

of recognition, and praise can help individuals feel more fulfilled, boost their self-esteem, improve their self-evaluations, and trigger positive emotions, decades of research have shown. These positive downstream consequences of compliments make intuitive sense: Praise aligns with our naturally positive view of ourselves, confirming our self-worth.

Second, practicing kindness helps life feel more meaningful. For example, spending money on others and volunteering our time improves wellbeing, bringing happiness and a sense of meaning to life, research finds. Being kind brings a sense of meaning because it involves investing in something bigger than ourselves. It shapes both how others perceive us — which improves our reputation — and how we view ourselves. We draw inferences about who we are by observing our own behavior, and our acts of kindness make us believe that we have what it takes to be a good person. In the remote workplace, where cultivating moments of joy is difficult, this may be a particularly important benefit that translates into long-term job satisfaction.

Third, as we found in a new set of studies, giving compliments can make us even happier than receiving them. We paired up participants and asked them to write about themselves and then talk about themselves with each other. Next, we asked one of them to give an honest compliment about something they liked or respected about the other participant after listening to them. Consistently, we found that giving compliments actually made people happier than receiving them. Surprisingly, though, people were largely unaware of the hedonic benefits of being kind.

Why does giving compliments boost our happiness to such a degree? A key ingredient of well-being that we've sorely lacked during the pandemic plays a role: social connection. In our studies, we found that giving compliments engendered a stronger social connection than receiving compliments because giving them encouraged people to focus on the other person. Sure, receiving a compliment feels great, but making a

thoughtful, genuine compliment requires us to think about someone else — their mental state, behavior, personality, thoughts, and feelings.

Thinking about other people is often a precondition to feeling connected to them. In this way, compliments can become a social glue, enhancing connections and positivity in relationships, and making us happier.

Nonetheless, people are often hesitant to give compliments. Why? The idea of approaching someone and saying something nice can trigger social anxiety and discomfort, recent research by Erica Boothby and Vanesa Bohns shows. For this reason, we assume people will feel uncomfortable and be bothered by receiving a compliment, when the opposite is true.

In addition to these psychological barriers, working remotely has added more structural barriers to random acts of kindness, compliments, and recognition. Before the pandemic, organizations often recognized employees through formal programs, while serendipitous encounters could easily generate a simple thank you or words of praise. By contrast, today's Zoom meetings tend to follow strict agendas that leave no room for any other topic, let alone compliments.

Organizations benefit from actively fostering kindness. In workplaces where acts of kindness become the norm, the spillover effects can multiply fast. When people receive an act of kindness, they pay it back, research shows — and not just to the same person, but often to someone entirely new. This leads to a culture of generosity in an organization. In a landmark study analyzing more than 3,500 business units with more than 50,000 individuals, researchers found that acts of courtesy, helping, and praise were related to core goals of organizations. Higher rates of these behaviors were predictive of productivity, efficiency, and lower turnover rates. When leaders and employees act kindly towards each other, they facilitate a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Bringing Kindness to Work

How can leaders promote kindness in the remote workplace? First, they can lead by example. People are naturally sensitive to the behaviors of high-status team members. By giving compliments and praising their employees, leaders are likely to motivate team members to copy their behavior and create norms of kindness in teams.

Second, leaders can set aside time during Zoom meetings for a “kindness round” in which team members are free to acknowledge each other’s work. This need not take much time — even a few minutes a week will suffice. But these few minutes can boost morale and social connection, especially when months-long projects are mostly completed over Zoom.

Third, consider small spot bonuses. Companies such as Google have used “peer bonus” systems to encourage employees to send small amounts of money (from a fund in the organization) to each other to show appreciation for particularly effective work. Even a few dollars could have a positive effect; research finds that people appreciate small acts of kindness as much as large ones. A gift card or a small gift sent through the mail might work just as well. Simply knowing that one is appreciated can trigger the psychological benefits of kindness without costing the organization substantial sums.

The power of kindness can mitigate the ill effects of our increasingly online social world. It is an essential leadership skill that can cascade through people, changing the culture of the workplace along the way.



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