



Kindness in leadership

'Kindness' is seldom mentioned as a desirable leadership trait in MBA or executive programmes but it can have enormous benefits for organisations. **Gay Haskins** and **Lalit Johri** argue that it's time we all became more kindly

In a global climate of increasing complexity, competition, intolerance and impatience, there has been a steady erosion of public trust in both public and private sector organisations and their leaders. At the same time, there are calls for a more responsible and respectful form of leadership in business and society, for a leadership that fosters a sense of inclusion, connection and belonging.

Those of us who live in English-speaking countries or speak English on a daily basis, will hear the word “kind” very often. It is one of the 500 most frequently used words in the English language. Kind actions are praised and remembered: they have a “boomerang” effect, Kindness begets Kindness. Such acts cost nothing to give but create significant value.

The idea of kindness having a positive effect on humanity is present throughout religious thinking: it is both a virtue and a practical act, a behavioural as well as a cognitive or emotional response to others. As well, the world’s great philosophers have discussed and written a great deal about kindness. The Confucian “Golden Rule” of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” has been an inspiration throughout the ages.

Yet research has indicated that kindness is not regularly considered in the leadership programmes at business schools nor in the leadership literature. In the words of Mary Farebrother, former Director of London Business School’s Senior Executive Programme: “While working in executive education, I didn’t come across an organisational value statement or leadership competency framework that mentioned kindness. Although integrity, respect, collaboration and teamwork were highlighted, kindness was absent”.

We hope, therefore, that our new book, *Kindness in Leadership*, will open the door to a consideration of the strengths that kindness can bring to an organisation and the commitment and trust it can inspire among employees.

Kindness-based behaviours

We sought input from 200 leaders around the world in public and private sectors in both large and small organisations. A number of these had been participants on Saïd Business School’s Oxford Advanced Management and Leadership Programme and others came from the authors’ own wide networks, including members of EFMD and European Women’s Management Development Network (EWMD).

Irrespective of their country of origin, these worldwide leaders emphasised that kindness in leadership has a universal appeal and is characterised by a variety of kindness-based behaviours. These included: adopting a humane approach; fairness and equity; accommodating personal issues; treating others with respect; caring and being responsive; communicating with a personal touch; sharing information in a transparent way; explaining logically; listening intently and valuing the views of others; counselling and mentoring; and being inclusive as a leader.

A garment finishing company in Bangladesh, for example, showed kindness through the provision of nutritious meals to all employees to ensure their health and wellbeing. At a large retail chain in Turkey, the foremost element in the code of conduct is respect. This has been found to promote harmony and happiness, leading to high-quality consumer services: “happy employees create happy customers”.

A large number of respondents reported that they avoided impersonal emails or written office memos to communicate on personally sensitive issues, preferring instead to deal with issues via one-to-one or small group meetings. Simple gestures were found to matter a great deal.

Vivian Unt, owner-manager of the Vivian Vau shoe salon in Estonia, said: “Most commonly, kindness is expressed through little gestures that are not part of required conduct but are said and done because they make people feel good”.

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Kindness-based beliefs

The leaders also subscribed to beliefs that gave them a rationale for adopting kindness in their leadership style. In many cases these became part of the values and culture of the organisation that they led. These included beliefs that:

- people are central to the success of any organisation, contributing to success through their imagination, vision, inspiration, problem-solving abilities and personal drive
- equity and fairness are important ideals in enhancing employee self-confidence and loyalty
- respect and care stimulate ownership and commitment

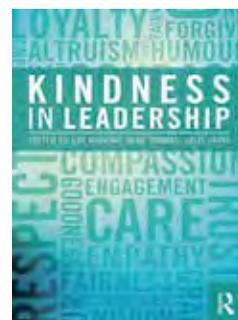
It appears from our interviews that kindness in leadership can be facilitated across the whole organisation if leaders share these types of beliefs. Sally Waterston, founder and director of the UK business and IT consultancy Waterstons, states her beliefs as follows: “We believe completely in people first – we don’t have fixed hours, we don’t have fixed holidays – we measure people on what they do and not when they do it. People said it would not work but we are still here 22 years later and making a profit. I am absolutely passionate about kindness but not from a paternalistic point of view. I think it should be within the company, it should be peer to peer and we see it every day in our business.”

The impact of kindness in leadership

These examples suggest that these kinds of leadership behaviours and strong beliefs in the value of kindness can have a positive impact on the culture of an organisation, its well-being and its performance.

For employees, kindness can result in greater happiness and contentment, higher motivation and energy, higher engagement and participation, and greater loyalty and commitment. The relationship between teams and management have also been found to be more creative, innovative, collaborative and positive when trust is more prevalent. This parallels evidence from the growing field of research into factors affecting employee engagement, which consistently shows that levels of engagement are linked to a sense of being valued, having the opportunity to develop and progress within the organisation, and enjoying positive relationships with colleagues. Furthermore, being known as “a great place to work” helps to attract and retain the best talent.

This positive impact was stressed by Richard Everard, chairman of Everards Brewery Ltd in the UK: “Kindness is at the very heart of our philosophy, but it demands that everyone lives and breathes it every day. The human, financial and societal outcomes are tangible and will endure through future generations”.



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Educating for compassion, empathy and kindness

If kindness can have the positive impact on organisations and on society that these leaders suggest, should it not also be more central in education and development programmes? We looked at a number of initiatives around the world and found that a growing number of primary and secondary schools are stressing the importance of kindness, compassion and empathy in their objectives and curriculum. Several schools have kindness as a core value and celebrate World Kindness Day each year on 13 November.

In 2016, Harvard Graduate School of Education published a report called *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*. It tackles the intense focus on personal achievement and academic performance and the advantages enjoyed by more affluent students.

It calls for an admissions process that also focuses on a concern for the common good, citizenship, empathy and kindness. Compassion is now a core value at a number of universities,

especially those that have signed the worldwide Charter for Compassion, committing to building a more compassionate world.

There is also a growing number of training and research programmes, focusing on compassion and empathy and related behaviours, including kindness. Some of these have been pioneered through medical schools and research centres following breakthroughs in neurological research and have been targeted at the healthcare sector where compassion, kindness and empathy can be core organisational values. These initiatives could certainly be relevant to business schools, their faculty and to degree students and executive education participants.

However, as we saw at the opening to this article, kindness does not yet really appear on the leadership agenda within business schools. But perhaps the door is opening?

Putting kindness on the business school agenda

Although few business schools put kindness to the fore in their MBA and/or executive programmes, behaviours, concepts and approaches that have links to kindness are increasingly emphasised.



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Emotional intelligence, for example, has been widely embraced in leadership teaching. A Coursera online course, “Inspiring Leadership through Emotional Intelligence,” developed by Richard Boyatzis at Case Western University in the US, focuses on emotional intelligence, hope, mindfulness and compassion and their role in alleviating stress and building leadership capabilities.

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Much work has been done through the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business to foster awareness of the importance of compassion in the workplace. Ross has formed the Compassion Lab, a network of scholars working in this area around the world, www.compassionlab.com. The Roffey Park Institute’s work on compassion is also significant. It was featured in *Global Focus* in 2016 and the Institute has now developed an online tool to assess individual propensity for compassion. Other initiatives include increasing our understanding of the power of empathy and compassion through the arts: improvisation, drama, poetry and literature, for example. In addition, programmes that emphasise responsible business conduct and responsible leadership will certainly cover areas linked to kindness in the broader societal context.

John North, Managing Director of the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI), spoke about the importance of empathy when he was interviewed for *Kindness in Leadership*. He said: “Really empathising with less advantaged people may require business leaders to make decisions that may not be in their own interest. This will be truly heroic”.

Kindness: the MBA reaction

As well as interviews with business leaders, we sought perspectives from MBA/EMBA students at three institutions with which we are directly involved: the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford; EADA in Barcelona; and students on the MBA programme at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN).

In all three schools, we found that students were very intrigued by thinking about kindness. One wrote that kindness was central to his Buddhist faith and that combining this with his work was a great challenge. Another said: “It’s likely to be a hot topic in future. An organisation with a reputation for kindness would attract [students]”. Our interviews suggested an appetite for the inclusion of kindness in the leadership curriculum.

We would suggest, therefore, that the time is ripe for incorporating kindness into business school MBA programmes and research. If business schools are to address the calls for a more responsible and respectful form of leadership, kindness could be a central to making this happen.

Kind and kindness are simple words and easy for everyone to grasp. In an inclusive world, we urge business schools and management centres to give them greater attention.

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