

# Is Your Leadership Style Too Nice?

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“If you work very hard and get results, you are well rewarded here. But if you don’t work as hard and don’t really produce, you are also well rewarded.”

That’s what an employee of a premier electronics firm told one of us (Ron) during a consulting engagement several years ago. The company’s CEO took pride in a supportive, relationship-based culture. But interviews with employees revealed a common theme: too many key people were not pulling their weight, and the top performers felt unfairly burdened. As laudable as the CEO’s commitment to a supportive culture was, the way it manifested meant that the company was becoming too nice to be good.

We’ve seen variations on this theme in our decades of consulting and other work with organizations of all kinds, both in the private sector and, particularly acutely, in the nonprofit arena. In essence, many leaders hold themselves and their organizations back from being good by being too nice—avoiding tough conversations or decisions out of a desire to spare others discomfort. For example:

- A founder keeps a loyal employee in a role that outgrew them five years ago.
- A department head clings to a pet project with lackluster results because the team “believes in it.”
- A manager praises what’s working but never delivers the hard feedback that would unlock their report’s real growth.

Leadership behaviors like these corrode organizational performance and value. Employees don't perform at their best or develop to their full potential, company resources are wasted on lower-value work, and even strong performers become frustrated and demotivated. Taken far enough, this eventually becomes an existential threat to organizations, which can fall behind competitors and no longer be able to carry out their missions or employ their people.

As strategic advisers and partners to large corporations and nonprofits (respectively), we've been dismayed to see behaviors like these becoming not only more common but more celebrated despite the consequences. In this article we'll explain why being too nice is a problem and what we recommend instead for leaders who want to be good.

### **Why Are Leaders Too Nice?**

Being anxious to avoid hurting others is understandable. It's hard to look someone in the eye and be tough with them, even when that's what real excellence requires. It's also easy to flatter ourselves that our fear of conflict is really a commitment to kindness.

And of course, kindness is important—especially now. The combination of an employer's labor market (relative to recent years) and a new wave of return-to-office mandates has added up, some have argued, to a broken "psychological contract" between employers and employees. Smart leaders focused on the long-term will want to counteract these forces. Furthermore, as organizations strive to adapt AI into their operations and cultures, many leaders rightly want to lean into human connection, empathy, and kindness to retain the best people. So there are real strategic reasons to consider the impact of your tough choices and words on others.

But conflating that with avoiding tough decisions and conflict is a mistake. In fact, in a recent HBR article, "Why Kindness Isn't a Nice to Have", Nicki Macklin, Thomas H. Lee and Amy C. Edmondson argue for the importance of kindness, while noting this important distinction: "Kindness often means doing hard things like giving tough feedback...Niceness is about avoiding discomfort, staying agreeable, sidestepping hard conversations, and letting things slide. Kindness means the opposite."

In other words, good leadership is about having a positive impact not just on individuals in a given moment, but, where possible, on those individuals in the long term, and especially on the organization as a whole in the long term. To have that impact, we think many leaders today need to actively become less nice. As Jack Welch used to say, "Leaders need to be soft-hearted, but also hard-headed."

### **Being Good, Not Nice**

If overly nice leadership corrodes value, what does good leadership look like? Here are four key dimensions: more accountability, more candid feedback, less focus on retention as an end in itself, and tighter strategic decision-making.

**More accountability, especially for those with higher pay.**

For an organization to excel, it's vital to hire and retain the best possible talent. This usually requires robust compensation. But providing higher pay also should mean measuring and demanding high performance. Zeynep Ton, author of *The Case for Good Jobs*, cites Costco as one of many examples where an employer pays a high wage, sets high expectations, and sees employees deliver in return, overperforming relative to competitors.

Not doing this has long-term consequences. The company cited at the beginning of this article—in which good and poor performers were rewarded equally—went from being one of the top electronics firms in the world to becoming second rate over the course of a decade. Its flagship product, which fueled much of the firm's profitability, was outflanked by several competitors with better technology, partly because the R&D team wasn't held accountable for innovation as much as its competitors. As a result, the company had to sell off parts of the business and was eventually merged with another firm.

We've seen many instances of corporate CEOs being too nice to hold people to account, but nonprofit boards and board chairs may be even more egregious offenders. A BoardSource survey of more than 600 nonprofit CEOs found that 47% did not have a clear understanding of what their boards expected of them, and 21% had never had a formal evaluation of their performance.

Naturally, setting clear expectations and being serious about holding people accountable for meeting them may lead to losing committed, well-meaning people who can't reach the required level of performance. There's a psychological and emotional cost to fostering this kind of turnover, even if it is in the larger best interest of the firm. Moreover, doing this well takes work: Leaders will need to spend more time on performance management, making sure goals have clear measurements and tracking those metrics not just once a year, but continuously.

To see how this might work, take another of Ron's past clients, a company that perennially paid more than other companies in its industry and produced industry-leading revenue and growth numbers. Executives set an explicit expectation that sales reps would meet or exceed their goals, build strong relationships with customers, and have specific plans for helping their customers be successful.

These expectations were reinforced almost every day as part of the company's culture. In all of the sales offices, for example, visiting senior business leaders from the CEO on down would routinely ask sales reps how they were doing against their quotas and goals for the quarter. If a rep couldn't immediately cite the numbers, the senior leader would go to the computer, look them up, and then talk with the sales rep about how he or she needed to internalize them and take them seriously. "If you don't meet your goals, then I won't meet mine," they often said.

Most sales reps did meet their goals—or were asked to work somewhere else. Yet it's worth noting that this rigor didn't distress employees as a whole—the firm was often ranked as being a "best company to work for."

**More candid feedback.**

To help employees meet those rising expectations, organizations need to support employees with the training it takes to build and refine their skills, and a key part of this training is the gift of critical feedback.

Delivering feedback effectively makes a real difference in organizational performance. In a series of Gallup studies involving 15,000 managers and employees, giving feedback that included recognition of recent work, clarity about expectations, an honest focus on how to better achieve goals, and coaching about how to build on a person's strengths resulted in significantly higher employee engagement, lower turnover, and a higher likelihood of performance improvement relative to peers who did not deliver or receive feedback this way. To be sure, Gallup's and other research shows that even critical feedback should be delivered empathetically to be most effective.

Ironically, though, the most empathetic managers often feel the most distress at giving feedback to begin with, and this can cause them to sugarcoat feedback to the point that it's unclear. But giving tough feedback candidly in a way that employees can hear and act on is a skill that can be developed. In a recent survey of over 18,000 employees across more than 350 non-profit organizations conducted by Gali's firm, Leading Edge, 90% of employees agreed that "my manager treats me with respect," but only 72% agreed that "the feedback I receive from my manager is useful for my growth"—perhaps corresponding with today's cultural focus on niceness. In direct response to these results, a number of the participating organizations trained managers on giving and receiving feedback, resulting in an average uptick of five points in key feedback-related questions just one year later. Of course, this approach won't be easy for many managers, so committing requires significant training and constant reinforcement.

### **Less focus on retention for its own sake.**

Retaining high-performing employees is absolutely vital for organizational success. At the same time, it should not be an end in itself. That's especially true now; younger workers don't work their whole careers at one organization anymore. We need to normalize the possibility of moving on when people and their roles aren't the right match.

That doesn't mean kicking people to the curb without a thought for their livelihood, though. Generous severance, references, and active help finding a better-fit position are the ethical way to approach this, as well as reassuring the remaining team that both performance and people matter.

Several years ago, Ron worked with a large pharmaceutical company that wanted to boost its R&D output. To make the research organization more nimble, the firm acquired a small, fast-moving biotech and put its leaders in charge of one combined therapeutic area. Rather than trying to find ways to keep the whole original staff engaged despite the enormous changes, the new managers clearly laid out expectations for each role and invited everyone to reapply for their current job or for a different one. Researchers could also pursue a more traditional role elsewhere in the company or accept a generous severance package.

About 80% of the existing team chose to interview. Some opted out after learning what the new roles required, and others weren't selected because the fit wasn't right. But most found the process energizing and were excited by the challenge of working differently. Although several capable people left, those who stayed genuinely wanted to be there. By prioritizing the right people over retention for its own sake, the group produced multiple therapies that moved into clinical trials within two years—far exceeding the company's prior results.

### **Tighten strategic focus: Say “no” more often.**

It's also critical that leaders should keep their talent focused on things that matter. Strategy is about saying “no” to a million little things so we can say “yes” to the most important ones. Of course, declining to pursue some projects runs the risk of stopping something that might turn out to be important. But doing too much or doing the wrong things just to keep everyone happy, makes it less likely that anything important gets done.

Steve Jobs was famously obsessed with focus and simplicity. Walter Isaacson reports that at an annual retreat, Jobs would ask executives to painstakingly create an ordered list of 10 top priorities for the company that year. Then he'd cross off the bottom seven, saying, “We can only do three.” Apple's incandescent success under Jobs's focused leadership speaks for itself. (We don't recommend every aspect of Jobs's leadership approach, but we love this one.)

Several years ago, Ron worked with the head of R&D at a technology company who worried that the organization was spread too thin across too many projects. But when he conducted a portfolio review, he found that nearly every project leader claimed to be “very close” to a major breakthrough and argued for continued funding.

Instead of accepting these claims, the R&D leader introduced three clear criteria for evaluating projects: Was there a viable scientific path forward? Would success address an unmet customer need? And was the company ahead of competitors, based on patent and market intelligence? Using these criteria, he narrowed the portfolio to a smaller set of the most promising efforts.

Although he worried that shutting projects down would anger researchers, the opposite happened. Resources were reallocated to higher-potential work, accelerating the research pipeline, and the teams accepted the decisions because the process was transparent and fair. Some even admitted they knew their previous projects were on a weak trajectory and were relieved to move on to opportunities with a better chance of success.

Saying no to strategic initiatives can be especially challenging at nonprofits, where programs are often championed by influential donors. Ron worked with an organization focused on increasing high school graduation rates among at-risk teens in six cities. Several board members, donors, and staff with a vision of national impact pushed to expand to a new city every year, but the CEO worried the organization lacked the bandwidth. However she didn't want to alienate supporters.

To demonstrate the need for strategic focus, she convened small-group discussions to discuss possibilities for the organization's growth strategy, inviting stakeholders to consider a number of

alternatives and what each would require. The groups ultimately agreed with the CEO. The organization chose to deepen its reach by selectively adding schools and neighborhoods within existing cities, increasing their support of at-risk teens while building capacity for future growth—and simultaneously increasing the financial commitment of the very donors who had been pressing for the organization's expansion.

### **Getting Started**

There will be natural resistance to raising the bar in these four ways, especially for people who have gotten comfortable. Changing culture and expectations toward being good rather than nice will require courage and persistence. It also requires a team effort—you can't be the only one demanding excellence and making tough choices. As a senior leader, part of your job is to develop a leadership team with the same mindset that can cascade this way of working throughout the organization and make it part of the operating culture.

To start, think small. Pick one decision you've been dodging because it might bruise an ego or provoke pushback. Make the good choice instead of the nice one: Have the direct conversation. End the under-performing project. Redefine the role. Take the next step and make it a practice, and you'll start a cultural flywheel: Candor becomes the new norm, and excellence becomes habitual as your actions will be directly linked to actually helping people and organizations flourish.