

Stop Being Nice, Start Being Kind: Why Real Connection at Work Matters

HR Executive | Maria O'Keeffe | February 5, 2025



Guest viewpoints

It's performance review season again at my company, which always gets me thinking about the broader topic of human connection in the workplace. Throughout my 25 years of leading teams, we've navigated some pretty significant shifts in workplace culture—everything from a global pandemic to evolving generational dynamics and the transformative impact of AI.

These experiences have shown me just how crucial it is to communicate and engage with people in a truly human-centric way. And a critical part of that approach is recognizing the important and often overlooked distinction between kindness and niceness.

Kindness vs. niceness: A mindset shift

While often used interchangeably, niceness and kindness represent fundamentally different approaches. As humans, our natural inclination is towards niceness—avoiding conflict,

smoothing things over and keeping everyone comfortable. But in a professional setting, this well-intentioned niceness can actually hold people back and even sabotage progress.

When dealing with a complex or difficult situation, niceness can unintentionally obscure the issue at hand and what's needed to improve it—serving to ameliorate discomfort among parties at best, or further entrench an unhelpful dynamic at worst, instead of creating action-based accountability.

Kindness, in contrast, allows us to confront uncomfortable truths with care and genuine thoughtfulness. This approach not only supports the people involved but also leads to more effective problem-solving. But, shifting from simply being nice to practicing true kindness takes a deliberate change in mindset—and it's not always easy. Here are a few in-situ tips for weaving kindness into your daily interactions and embracing it as a guiding philosophy for HR and people-focused work:

Practicing kindness in real time: Examples

One-on-one conversations: These are already a regular part of our work, but they're frequently associated with difficult situations like performance improvement plans, reviews or terminations. As a result, this can lead to these interactions being viewed as moments of criticism or failure rather than opportunities for growth.

Take feedback, for instance. Sugarcoating feedback isn't kind; it's detrimental. It leaves people confused and unsure of how to improve. Prioritizing short-term comfort over long-term success helps no one. True kindness involves being direct, even when it's challenging. It means providing honest feedback while also supporting professional development.

Growth comes from facing challenges head-on, not being shielded from them. We need to be transparent and constructive, recognizing that discomfort is often the catalyst for real change. And the data backs this up. Research summarized by the Stanford Graduate School of Business shows that employees crave constructive feedback. They want to know how to improve. They value honesty and care because it demonstrates investment in their potential.

I've seen this firsthand, time and again. Even in the most difficult conversations, when honesty is coupled with compassion, people gain clarity, feel respected and—believe it or not—often express gratitude. That's the power of real kindness vs. niceness: It unlocks potential and drives meaningful, lasting growth. It's not always easy, but it's always worth it.

Team and leadership settings: In team and leadership settings, we often grapple with big-picture business challenges to build consensus and chart a path forward. Effective consensus-building requires an environment of honesty and vulnerability where all voices are valued. However, it's also crucial to recognize that a clear decision must ultimately be reached. Kindness plays a vital role here, encouraging team members to speak openly and ensuring their contributions are treated with respect. This means fostering open dialogue, addressing challenges directly and navigating difficult conversations with transparency and compassion.

When conflict arises, a kind approach prioritizes resolution and unity, focusing on solutions that bring the team together. It's not about avoiding discomfort but rather confronting it with shared accountability and understanding. Practicing kindness strengthens teams, builds trust and fosters the collaboration essential for innovation and lasting success.

Broader communication: Communicating to a broad audience can feel like a high-stakes situation, especially in our line of work. It requires a deep understanding of how a large and diverse audience might receive and interpret our message.

The instinct may be to hold back, but I prefer to approach it through the lens of kindness. I ask myself: What is in the best interest of our employees? What will best enable our business to move forward based on what we know right now? Sharing employee survey results, acknowledging challenges and introducing new policies are most impactful when approached with kindness and transparency. People value honesty and want to know they've been heard.

For example, we conduct an annual employee sentiment survey. When I share the results with our employees, I make it a point to highlight both the positive feedback and areas where we need to improve, even including unedited, anonymized employee comments to illustrate concerns.

After one recent survey results share-out, several employees approached me to express their appreciation for my candor and transparency. You don't need to have all the answers right away, but acknowledging the areas that need attention and committing to work on solutions together goes a long way toward building trust, confidence and goodwill.

Building a kindness culture in the age of AI

I can't write a piece about human-centric workplaces in 2025 without acknowledging the transformative impact of technology. As automation and AI reshape how we work, prioritizing genuine kindness vs. superficial niceness becomes not just beneficial, but essential. AI frees us from mundane tasks, allowing us to focus on the human elements that matter most: empathy, understanding and authentic connection.

While AI excels at processing data and automating processes, it cannot replicate the power of human connection. This shift allows us to embrace our uniquely human strengths—supporting, uplifting and helping others succeed—the very reasons many of us chose this profession.

Let's go beyond surface-level niceness and embrace genuine kindness—the kind that drives growth, empowers individuals and fosters thriving, resilient workplaces. It's not only good for our people; it's also good for business.