

A New Leadership Model: Leading with Kindness

Evidence is growing that kindness is a key leadership quality that motivates employees to do their best, inspires them to innovate, and creates an organizational culture that makes employees want to stay.

But for too long, kindness in leadership has been misunderstood and undervalued. The practicalities of being kind in the workplace pose some challenging questions for leaders to grapple with:

- Will being kind make me seem too nice to be a leader?
- Will people respect me if I am kind?
- Will I be thought of as a pushover if I am kind?

If you have asked yourself these questions, you are not alone. These are questions that women leaders, in particular, frequently ask themselves. The general perception is that kindness is a so-called 'soft' skill, and the implication is that it makes leaders ineffective by appearing less assertive, authoritative or focused on winning. And for women leaders who have confronted stereotypes in the workplace, these perceptions get magnified. But as women leaders, it is time for us to lean in and embrace kindness as a cornerstone to effective leadership.

The impact of kindness

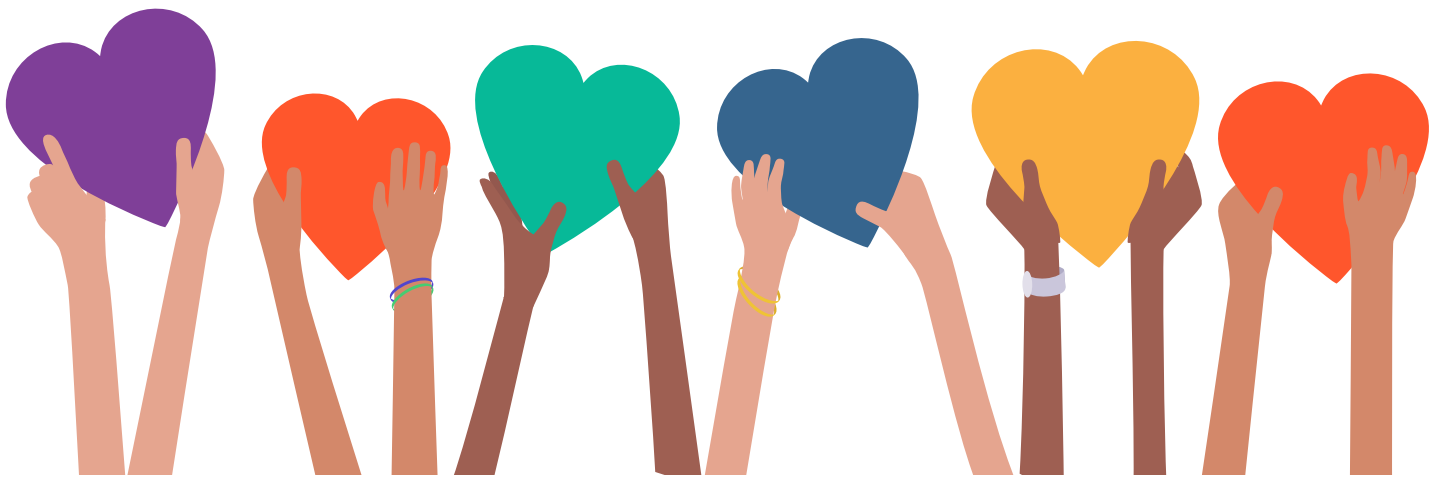
Research conducted by Hall and Partners and Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, found that kind leadership enhances employee engagement, leads to higher quality work, and increases the bottom line.



The 3 Cs of Kind, Inclusive Leadership

Kindness is an essential component of a diverse, equitable and inclusive organization. True kindness requires an acknowledgement of inequity. Inclusive leaders embody kindness by using their power and privilege to better the lives of others. Kindness is not about being nice and saying 'yes'. Kindness is often the harder road – and it takes curiosity, courage and commitment.

- 1 Curiosity**
 Kindness requires that we make ourselves vulnerable in order to learn how others are experiencing the world. As inclusive leaders, we need to admit that we do not know all the answers. We need to stay curious to others' perceptions and flex our empathy muscle. It is this generosity of spirit that enables inclusive leaders to listen and to empower team members.
- 2 Courage**
 Inclusive leaders are brave enough to seek out learning opportunities which may push them to the edge of their comfort zone. They are honest enough to acknowledge their own biases, and strong enough to work to surpass them. Recognizing our own limitations takes courage. But it is this vulnerability and humility that ultimately creates a kind, inclusive organizational culture.
- 3 Commitment**
 Kindness is a commitment to being authentic and transparent. Kind leaders stay the course and do what they can to ensure that each employee feels connected



to the organization. They work to embed inclusion in systems and processes, they measure their impact, and they do not shy away from taking bold stands.

How to lead with kindness

In my career I have worked with some exceptional leaders who have led with kindness to transform their organizational cultures.

Sodexo's former CEO, Michel Landel, a White, French male, was a leader who embodied kindness and he led with kindness to transform his organization to be more inclusive.

What did Michel do? He always acknowledged people and their contributions and inquired after their wellbeing, regardless of who they were or their level in the organization. I recall going on site visits with him and before he met the management teams or the clients, he would go to the kitchen and shake hands with the servers, the janitors and cashiers and inquire after their families.

Michel was always **curious** – he was a consummate learner and made himself vulnerable. He would often say, “You don’t know what you don’t know.”

As CEO he positioned me and the DEI function for success by having me report directly to him – signalling his **commitment** and the criticality of DEI to the organization.

He personally sponsored women and other underrepresented leaders,

many of whom went on to lead large business portfolios.

Michel treated DEI as he would any other business priority, making it a strategic pillar for business growth. Every business review included a DEI update.

And like any other business priority, he supported measuring progress and holding teams accountable and he de-coupled the DEI incentive from the financial performance of the company signalling that we were on the DEI journey for the long haul.

And lastly, he had the **courage** to take bold stands. On one occasion, a client asked that Sodexo not “promote” its LGBTQ initiatives on its website and in other communications. Without a minute’s hesitation Michel said, “We can do without clients who don’t respect our values.” He believed in a purpose-driven organization and in treating diversity as a value that creates a strong brand promise and business outcomes.

Michel was an inclusive, transformative leader who was strong and also enduringly kind: and he drew out the best in all of us.

We all know that our best work, our most creative ideas and solutions come when we feel secure and able to bring our whole selves to work—when we feel a sense of belonging. With kindness, we can build an inclusive culture where engaged employees positively impact performance, productivity and ultimately profits.

As women, we are taught from an early age to be “nice.” But kindness is not about being nice. It is not the easy road – it takes

authenticity, self-awareness, generosity and resilience. Let’s transform that social messaging into strong, kind leaderships that draws out the best in ourselves and others.

These are not easy times. The world needs kind leaders more than ever to step up and create more inclusive organizations, communities and societies where we are invested to do our best and can all thrive. ☺



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