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# Let's Get Specific About Kindness in Business



By Nadav Klein , INSEAD

## Being kind in business has its limits - here's why you shouldn't go overboard.

Being kind to others is great when it comes to personal relationships. But is it great in business?

Regular readers of business publications would have noticed an uptick in discussions around the value of **kindness in the workplace** and how it can be **practiced effectively**. Kindness has also been increasingly emphasised across various industries such as **oil and gas**, **fashion and beauty**, **consulting**, **security**, **marketing**, **agriculture** and **banking**, to name a few. It seems that kindness has been elevated as a key management practice and business strategy.

Indeed, being kind is better than being unkind. Everyone prefers to work with someone who is friendly, generous and considerate than with someone who is aloof, selfish and uncaring. This much is clear. But thinking more carefully about this point gives an unsettling sense that it is lacking substance. It's like

a doctor who suggests medication to cure a disease, or exercise to improve your health. The key questions are: “What is the dose?” and “How much and what kind of exercise?”

As with many trendy concepts in business, the idea of kindness feels true but also vague. It is true that kindness helps in terms of how we are perceived by others, in negotiations and in our treatment of internal stakeholders and customers. However, recommending that individuals be kind in a business setting lacks specificity. It is easy to come up with ways to be kind to others. But it is harder to pinpoint just how kind we should be.

### **Kindness has its limits**

Consider the following situation. You are given a certain amount of money – let’s say \$10 – and an opportunity to be kind. This opportunity is as follows: There is another person in the room with you, and you can choose to give some of the money to them. You can give nothing; you can give the entire \$10; or you can give anything in between. You don’t know this person, they cannot retaliate, and you will likely never encounter them again. So, it is really up to you.

How will the other person judge you, based on the amount you decide to give?

**Academic research** has studied this question across various countries. The findings revealed that as the amount you give increases from nothing to an equal split, the other person regards you more positively. But, importantly, giving half is optimal. Giving three quarters or even the entire sum doesn’t benefit your reputation any more than giving half the amount would.

The result replicates across various monetary amounts. It was also observed across cultural contexts, including Western (United States, United Kingdom and Denmark) and Eastern (China, Russia and Turkey) ones. Although the situation described in this experiment is admittedly contrived, the findings replicate across other scenarios including donating to non-profits and sharing food with others.

What is so special about giving half of what you have? Additional experiments clarified that what matters is the adherence to norms of acceptable behaviour. In the case of unearned money, an even split is the acceptable norm. In terms of dealing with customers, the necessary amount of kindness consists of meeting their expectations. When it comes to responding to work requests from colleagues, meeting expectations is also the key.

People simply have such high appreciation for others who meet social expectations that there is little room for your reputation to go any higher when you exceed them. The key idea is understanding how to handle the trade-off between benefitting another person and benefitting yourself. This will enable us to understand how much kindness we should exhibit.

### **Striking a balance**

It seems that what others really want is for us to be decent. So long as we treat people according to the basic standards of fairness and acceptable conduct – and be “a little bit nice” to them – we quickly gain their approval and goodwill. Indeed, other [research](#) has found that when people are treated decently, they respond just as kindly as they would after being treated with more extreme generosity.

In contrast, when we give of ourselves so much that we undermine our own goals and situation, our reputation does not increase commensurably. Herein lies the limiting principle for kindness – the “dosage” if you will.

Be as kind as to meet the expectations of what a decent person would do in the given situation. If you fail to do so, your reputation will suffer. People will be less likely to want to work with you, and the goodwill that you have created will quickly deteriorate. Go above and beyond what a decent person would do, and you will not be rewarded, at least not in terms of your reputation and work relations.

One objection to these conclusions is that they imply that we should place limits to our generosity. Does saying that kindness should not be overdone

mean that less kindness will exist in the world? In my view, this is where the qualifier “in business” comes into play.

We are not discussing close romantic relationships or friendships, nor are we talking about philanthropy. Although business relationships can be warm, they are largely transactional in nature. In the course of the day, most of us who work in business interact with many people – customers, colleagues, stakeholders. It is not sustainable to dial our kindness to the maximum in all, or even in most, of these interactions.

In reality, we often must balance our own goals with those of our team and the other individuals we encounter. If we set the goal of giving of ourselves to no end, we are not being realistic. And we might develop resentment towards others who seem to just take from us without giving enough back.

Overall, the recommendation to be kind in business is a good one. Being kind is clearly better than being unkind. However, we must remember that when doing so, we should be attuned to the given norms, social rules and expectations in any given situation, especially those that repeat themselves over the course of our days. Focusing on meeting those norms and expectations leads to outsized reputational benefits, while also preserving our capacity to, at times, prioritise our own objectives over others’ goals.

Maintaining this balance and benefitting from its rich reputational rewards is the essence of the business case for kindness.

*This article is adapted from a [commentary](#) published in The Straits Times.*

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