

ARE NICE LEADERS EFFECTIVE?

You don't have to be savage to succeed as you climb the corporate ladder.

STORY TOM LONCAR ILLUSTRATION DOMENIC BAHMANN

A look through recent headlines suggests kinder styles of leadership are in perilously short supply. The recent example of Uber chief executive Travis Kalanick's crass interaction with one of his drivers is one of the latest additions to a highlights reel that covers business, sport and presidential campaigns.

While such examples can dominate our attention, there are other examples that show nice guys can get the job done, such as Apple's Tim Cook and Microsoft's Satya Nadella, whose leadership is typified by authentic yet often humble interactions with their staff and customers, while they effectively preside over two of the world's largest tech companies.

At a national level, a 2016 thread on Q&A website Quora that asked, "Is Barack Obama a nice person when there isn't a camera around?" confirmed the former president's positive impact on the people he worked and engaged with, regardless of their status.

Yet, turning up the nasty dial can often be seen as essential for career advancement.

A coaching client on the verge of an executive-level promotion recently asked if she would need to lose her caring, people-oriented side – a signature aspect of her leadership style – to secure advancement. This assumption is not rare among managers endowed with soft skills. They feel they have to change to get ahead.

THE EVIDENCE FOR NICENESS

The good news is that niceness can win – and win big – provided that certain foundations are mindfully cultivated.



Tom Loncar is an executive coach who helps his clients develop skills for thriving in complexity.

Researchers at the Catalyst Research Centre for Advancing Leader Effectiveness in New York surveyed 1500 employees across six countries. Their report, *Inclusive Leadership: The View From Six Countries*, found humility in leadership was a critical factor in creating an inclusive work environment. Such environments yield higher engagement and more innovative ideas, and therefore a performance edge for their organisations.

What humility in leadership means is letting go of any tendency to have to be right all the time. Rather than seeing discussions as debates that need to be won, humble leaders use dialogue to genuinely understand and absorb other perspectives. When junior staff feel listened to, engagement and innovation more easily follow.

Wharton professor Adam Grant put leadership qualities under the microscope in his book *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*. His evidence shows that niceness can be the key to professional advancement. He describes the nicer variant of leader as a giver, with their opposite being a taker. "If you're a taker, you help others strategically, when the benefits to you outweigh the personal costs ... [whereas] if you're a giver at work, you simply strive to be generous in sharing your time, energy, knowledge, skills, ideas and connections with other people who can benefit from them."

Being a giver includes providing mentoring, sharing credit or making connections for others. (If you're interested in ascertaining your own giver or taker status, take Grant's assessment at adamgrant.net.)

DON'T BE A DOORMAT

Grant's research found that givers have a strong tendency to finish at the very top of the success ladder of their professions. Niceness can indeed win. However, givers also prop up the other end of the scale where they can be stuck in the lower echelons of their professions. So, what's going on?

In an interview with the University of Pennsylvania's Dr Scott Barry Kaufman, Grant said one of the reasons for this is that some givers can also become doormats.

"[They become] people who say 'yes' to all the people all the time, to all of the requests ... [they] try to help in too many different ways and at too many different times."

So, how can you be nice and get things done?

FROM REACTIVE TO CREATIVE

Nice leaders with doormat tendencies will operate from a reactive standpoint. They will be seen as the compliant good people who submissively absorb what they are exposed to.

Bob Anderson, founder and CEO of The Leadership Circle, in an interview with the *Integral Leadership Review*, says a reactive to creative shift is necessary for leadership effectiveness. A relationship-oriented leader with a creative orientation is not a doormat. They will creatively interact with the circumstances around them. These leaders will collaborate, empower others, be mindful of the wider organisational system they work in and not shirk harder conversations. Importantly, they will get things done.



“Humility means letting go of having to be right all the time.”

For these nice guys, their relationship skills will be the stimulant for their success, rather than a millstone for their misery.

CULTIVATE THE POWER OF NICE

So, niceness can get you places. But it requires some careful attention to how you go about it. Here's how to develop your niceness edge.

1. Use questions, not passive acceptance. You may be the safe pair of hands others turn to. However, your tendency to rescue puts you in areas you don't need to be in. This unfortunately means your bandwidth for doing the important things you really want to do is diminished. Be exploratory and ask questions before accepting what is in front of you.

2. Interested questions yield conversations. While many workplaces are a monologue-versus-monologue battleground, your people skills will make you naturally inclined to what Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind, co-authors of *Talk, Inc.: How Trusted Leaders Use Conversation to Power Their Organisations*, call the unpredictable vitality of dialogue. Dialogue involves conversing deeply, openly and interactively even if the person you are talking to is a monologuer. By doing this you will counter any doormat tendencies, learn more and it will show you to be a considered and empowered listener.

3. From individual ... to wider awareness. By mastering interactions with individuals you will become more attuned to the bigger picture in your organisation.

4. Recognise you have blind spots. If your niceness is not getting you anywhere, you might benefit from independent help. A trusted mentor or executive coach can provide an objective read and support the development of your authentic niceness edge.

5. Humility. Keep it. In an "I" world, stay "We". Be generous in your recognition.

6. Don't lose sight of what you do best. Communicating with and developing others is something relationship-oriented leaders do well. In busier times, it's easy to drift to solving problems autonomously. Choose connection and engagement over isolation. Nice and effective – it can be done.