

The Leverage of Kindness

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Blanche DuBois depended on “the kindness of strangers” in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is a curious behavioral attribute that most of us possess; we are indeed kind to strangers. It doesn’t seem to take much effort and it makes us feel good. In fact, research has demonstrated that acts of kindness have positive effects on the giver, both mentally and physically. Being kind makes us more relaxed, provides a source of energy and can actually reduce blood pressure. Acts of kindness have the potential to improve our overall sense of well-being and make us feel connected to others.

We also show kindness to the people who play peripheral roles in our lives—dry cleaners, travel agents, teachers, coaches, neighbors—and we try to have an affable, compassionate disposition. Needs theories suggest that we want to be liked, to belong and to affiliate with others, which are likely motivating factors for our kindness.

Why is it, then, that in many cases we do not demonstrate that same level of kindness to the people who matter most in our business-owning family? We struggle to compliment or reinforce progress, success and other contributions among family members. One can argue that there are many reasons for the absence of kindness: an acrimonious history, evidence of incompetence at work, lack of trust, a relationship built around competitive behavior, conflict between in-laws. The list of possibilities is long.

Through a lifetime of knowing and working with our family members there is, without question, fodder for strained relationships. This often prompts us to seek out evidence of the behavior we find most offensive, because it provides an opportunity to be critical, to perhaps confirm we are right.

But often criticism is delivered in a destructive way. When you think of specific examples of criticism, does it:

- Have a positive effect on people?
- Strengthen or weaken relationships?
- Encourage reciprocal behavior?
- Make you feel better?
- Foster desired change?
- Facilitate progress in a meeting?

We have choices when we’re managing demanding family relationships, and thought should be given to optimizing those choices. Challenge yourself to move past the low-hanging fruit that is criticism. There are many opportunities to reach out to family members and engage in acts of kindness and reap good rewards. I have, as an observer, witnessed the effects in meetings of even the smallest efforts to be kind: “Jack, that was a great presentation you gave to the client yesterday.” “Sandra, I was relieved when you brought up the new acquisition results with the banker.” “Tony made a good point a few minutes ago about employee training.” “I’m getting myself another cup of coffee; I’ll get you one

while I'm up." These simple gestures send powerful messages like:

- You are making a contribution.
- I am listening to you.
- I value you.
- I want you to feel included and appreciated.
- I want to share your value with others.

It would be irresponsible to suggest that we stop being critical, because there are benefits to constructive criticism. At the same time, there is significant leverage that can be realized from capitalizing on people's unique attributes and publicly recognizing efforts and accomplishments. Kindness tends to have a domino

effect: it increases well-being and, therefore, strengthens relationships. Strengthened relationships foster cohesion and congruence, which in turn contribute to efficient decision making. Efficient decision making expedites implementation of plans. This leads to meeting planned objectives. That is a lot of potential leverage from a small bit of ongoing compassion. It might even be the biggest return on any investment you make this year!

Think about the reactions you get from the strangers to whom you demonstrate kindness. Now think about the heartfelt reactions from those who cherish and, in fact, depend on that kindness most—not because you are a stranger, but because you are family.



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