

# Kindness as a Management Tool: How a Simple Management Concept Can Have Profound Effects

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*by Eugenia Terry, RHIA*

Change, new opportunities, and new challenges are the reality for HIM-more so than ever before. As we navigate through HIM's ever-changing environment, many are finding that though the nature of what we manage may be changing, the practice of management continues to be a key skill set for our profession.

According to author Scott Peck, management is one of the newest and still-emerging professions. As we continue to grow and learn new skills to operate in our fast-changing environment, we also need to continue to hone and develop our management skills.

In my career, I've found that kindness can have a profound effect on managing staff.

## Developing Fundamental Skills for Management

As an internal consultant at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, my role was to assist in the development of a total quality management (TQM) approach to business and culture. In the TQM approach, leadership skills are the base. I chose to specialize in learning and understanding the qualities that make a leader successful, able to lead an organization or department through change and growth, maintain a healthy bottom line, delight customers, and achieve a satisfied and rewarded work force.

It was at another consultant position at Pyramid Health Solutions, as interim manager of the HIM department, that I built on my TQM skills. At the time I was interested in the Buddhist concept of "loving kindness." Combined with my leadership studies earlier in the decade, I thought applying the concept of loving kindness to the workplace would be beneficial, and I wanted to see how it would play out in a work environment.

## Kindness Theory in Practice

Upon applying the concept of loving kindness, I first dropped the word "loving," as it could have connotations that were inappropriate and could muddy the impact of the concept. Secondly, I did not formally create a written job requirement around the concept. At the time, I only expected to be there three months (it ended up being six months) and felt that changing written job requirements was too much change under the circumstances. I was revising a lot of processes in the department and wanted to limit the stress on the staff.

At my first staff meeting, I told the staff a little about myself, what they could expect from me, and my expectations of them. I then introduced them to the concept of kindness. I told them I valued the quality of kindness, that I appreciated working in an environment where we treat each other with kindness, and that I expected to be treated the same. I said I expected all of us to treat each other and our customers with kindness.

There wasn't any particular reaction among the staff. They had been experiencing a lot of change and were probably reeling a little. Plus, they were getting to know me and my management style.

In the course of work, I would reiterate my expectations when it seemed appropriate, mentioning kindness as you would mention quality, productivity, or punctuality. I wish I could tell you that there was a dramatic change in the department-that civility reigned supreme and that results improved 80 percent-but I can't do that. I had no beginning data on how staff behaved in the first place. I didn't have a set of before and after statistics. Certainly staff were courteous to each other, but I had no reason to believe they had not been before.

## Theory Put to the Test

I came to work one morning and was confronted by a distressing situation. One of the day shift employees, “Dana,” came into her workstation and found that someone had carefully cut her face out of all her family photos. She was devastated.

To me, it was a nightmare. This was an egregious incident. Part of my job as manager was to provide a safe and nourishing environment within the context of the workplace. My responsibility was clear, and clearly impossible to carry out because I couldn’t prove who did it. It was my job to protect my employees from this type of despicable behavior, but my hands were tied.

I suspected who did it. There were two employees on the night shift, “Alice” and “Sylvia,” who didn’t like Dana. There had been instances of petty bickering and complaints among them (although nothing like this had occurred before). However, I had no way to prove it was either of the night shift employees. There were several other people working the night shift, and security and housekeeping also had access to the department. I had no way of proving who did this and enforcing some type of punishment.

Furthermore everyone in the department was aware of the situation between these three and suspected who had done it as well. I knew they were looking to me to see how I would resolve the situation. Dana also was looking to me for support and resolution.

I decided to interview each night shift employee about the incident, starting with Alice and Sylvia. I called them into my office one at a time. Alice came in, very defensive. Before I could get a word out she said, in an aggressive tone, she hadn’t done it and didn’t know who had.

I held up my hand and asked her to stop. I told her I didn’t want to know who had done it and that I was appalled that such a mean-spirited, unkind action had taken place in our department. I said I didn’t want to work with anyone who did something like that and so I didn’t want to know who did it. I was just going to talk to each person on the night shift and explain that this was unacceptable behavior and not to be repeated. I reiterated my expectation of kindness in the workplace.

Alice was utterly shocked when I told her I didn’t want to know who did it. My approach took the wind out of her sails. Her demeanor changed, and she became subdued and ashamed.

When I finished with Alice, I immediately asked Sylvia to come in before she had a chance to talk to Alice. Sylvia arrived with the same manner and attitude as Alice. The same conversation occurred, and Sylvia had the same shocked and embarrassed reaction to my view of the incident.

I then met with each of the other night shift employees. None of them came in with a defensive or aggressive attitude. They were each genuinely shocked and sorry that this had occurred to Dana. I reiterated what I had said to Alice and Sylvia. I told them I didn’t want to know who had done it. I told them I was shocked and saddened to have it happen in our department and that it was directly in opposition to our value of kindness.

## Reaping the Rewards

I was amazed at the impact of handling this situation based on the requirement of kindness. The energy changed in a positive way. There was a more lighthearted attitude, which I had not foreseen. Personally, I went from a place of feeling powerless to feeling that I had employed an effective tool that resulted in a satisfactory resolution.

That type of incident never occurred again. I don’t know what happened among Dana, Alice, and Sylvia, but the bickering and complaints ceased.

My relationships with the staff continued to flourish, and I was saddened when it was time to leave, as were they.

Kindness can be an effective management tool as well as an effective approach to one’s life in general. My career has shifted, so I don’t have the opportunity to apply it as a manager any more, but I do continue to believe in it and apply it in my interactions with my clients and colleagues. v

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**Article citation:**

Terry, Eugenia. "Kindness as a Management Tool: How a Simple Management Concept Can Have Profound Effects." *Journal of AHIMA* 77, no.8 (September 2006): 72,74.

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