What Impact Does Kindness Have in Business?

An Introduction to Creating a *Culture of Kindness Appreciative Inquiry Workshop Series* for World Kindness Ambassadors

by Jeremy Scrivens

http://www.theemotionaleconomyatwork.com

1. The Opportunity for a Culture of Kindness to Transform the Engagement Crisis in Our Workplaces Today

Each day, more and more people feel unengaged and unhappy at work across the Western World. The disengagement level of people at work has reached a crisis point in our enterprises and is seemingly outside the capability of many business leaders to turn around with what they have been taught and know about ‘managing’ people.

Managers need a new ‘toolkit’ with which to engage their people but above all they need a new lens with which to approach their people; the lens of *kind leadership*, which will engage their people to contribute their best through a culture of kindness.

If we take a closer look at this issue of engagement of people at work, what do we see?
There are three types of people at work; the Contributors, the Compliant and the Subversives. The Contributors are people who feel a profound connection to their enterprise, colleagues, and manager. They are emotionally engaged with their work; they are happy. They embrace change, they are creative and they are motivated by something more than performance; yet they are great performers; the best. For the Contributors, giving is a bigger idea, than getting and they act out their engagement each day through the behaviours of kindness.

The Contributors work for Enterprises and leaders who encourage, coach and develop these kind behaviours as the highest expression of being and doing well at work. These leaders create kind or virtuous enterprises. According to Gallup, at last count, only 18% of the Australian workforce is engaged or Contributing, whilst in the UK the figure is 16%.

The second type of people at work are not engaged or Compliant and unhappy. They do the minimum required in their work, they often wish they were somewhere else and they focus on what is in it for them. They focus on rewards and what they can get, rather than what they can give. They tend to be risk adverse, driven more by compliance than a search for creativity. They work for Deficit or Industrial Mindset managers who are focused on compliance and control, efficiency and performance, rather than kindness and compassion. Strangely, the Compliant are not performing at their best, even though the focus is on performance! Rarely do they experience ‘kind leadership’ and ‘virtuous behaviours’ do not figure in the leading indicators of the business or what they are measured on in their work.

At last count, 61% of the Australian work force is Compliant; the highest number in history and it is no co-incidence that we seeing the Australian marketplace under the greatest level of compliance and regulation in its history. No wonder more people are unhappy at work. Compliance cultures are not kind. Yet, when you talk with many compliant people at work, they tell you how much they would love to have leaders who engage them around contribution, not compliance. They want to be happy and they are waiting to respond to kind leadership. Research shows that the Contributors are worth four times more to the Enterprise bottom line than the Compliant are to the business.

The third Group are the Subversives. This group is not just unhappy, they act out their unhappiness at work, everyday undermining what their colleagues accomplish either physically through damage and industrial sabotage or by opposing positive change. More often than not, the Subversives have experienced the opposite of kindness at work, which is cruelty; either cruelty from a leader or from an uncaring, unloving system. An example of cruelty is bullying.

2. What Engages People at Work – Kindness is a Bigger Idea than Performance

Today, there are innumerable surveys on what engages people to be happy at work. Whilst they differ in some respects, it is possible to see recurring themes around what constitutes high levels of happiness at work. The happiest people, those are consistently contributing, work for kind leaders and they thrive.

The Corporate Leadership Council, a peak US research body, has concluded that the most engaged people give their all to their work because they are emotionally committed, not rationally committed. Emotional means engaged ‘from the heart’, not the head. The Gallup Group’s research confirms this finding.
Unengaged people or the *Compliant* are engaged rationally by their managers and the conversation is usually around ‘what do I get’ and it often becomes adversarial; rarely rising above the subject of money, working conditions, performance outputs, compliance, efficiency improvement and negative consequences for poor performance.

Conversely, the *Contributors* are engaged not from the head but from the heart around ‘how do I give’, ‘how can we make a meaningful difference together’ and ‘how do we learn and grow together’. Contributors work for leaders who take the time to engage them as unique individuals, not as cogs in the factory machine or assets register. They ask their people ‘how can I help you be more of who you are at work so that you can contribute your best’ which means helping people to give and be kind and generous to others.

We live in an age when it is supposed to be all about me and my success, yet the research is showing that people, including the Gen Y kids, want to be engaged from the heart around something bigger than them and they want to give and be kind to others. Blessing White’s international 2011 Employee Engagement survey concluded that the best leaders ‘create a culture and work flow where people are inspired to give more than they get’.


‘Their work shows that worker happiness has fallen every year since--in good economic times and bad. Today, over half of American workers effectively hate their jobs. But it’s the past four years that have brought employee discontent to new and highly charged levels.

Whether we realize it or not, workers have been under constant duress. Because of scarce resources, few opportunities for development and promotions--not to mention the fact that people often have been required to do the work of more than one person--a lot of our workforce is burnt out. Employees across the country feel overworked, under-rewarded and greatly unappreciated.’

In other words, many workers are experiencing cruelty at work, or if we want to put this a little more gently, an absence of kind leadership.

Mark Crowley observed that people who stayed at work and contributed even at times when the work was hard in tough economic times did so because they worked for leaders who showed them four kindness behaviours - *Appreciation, Respect, Support and Recognition*.

1.5 million people quit their jobs in the USA in February 2012; the highest on record and they did so because they worked for leaders and Enterprises who did not show them sufficient kindness. The fact that jobs were harder to find did not stop these people walking away, even though many had no other jobs lined up to go to; they had simply had enough. They left because they were emotionally disconnected from their work.

This trend will get worse for those leaders who do not manage by a code of kindness. Gen Y won’t put up with unkindness at work and they will tweet or post on Facebook about their experiences. What will they say about your organisation; is it kind, cruel or indifferent?
3. How Do Kind Leaders Build a Culture of Kindness?

The evidence is now emerging that the best workplaces, defined as those that achieve exceptional contribution from their people, develop a Culture of Kindness which they nurture, develop and sustain over time, even when cash flow and economic times are tough. We can call these Positive Enterprises and they focus on creating an abundance of good and positive things, as distinct from the mainstream business practice for 300 years which focuses on preventing bad things from happening, on fixing problems & eradicating errors, on narrowing the deficit gap rather than building the abundance bridge.

The Emerging Kind Leaders in business focus their efforts on building the Abundance Bridge which takes their people on a journey from the land of Deficit Organisational Practice, the prevalent model of management in our 300 year industrial economy, to the land of Positive Enterprises where people can flow in their work and experience what it is like to be contributing their best.

In building and nurturing the Abundance Bridge, Kind Leaders focus on four elements.

- **Manage Good not Bad**: Rather than spend time preventing bad things happening, Kind Leaders spend time looking for good in their enterprises and how to extend good in order to grow. So rather than trying to find out the causes of bullying, instead they look for great examples of kindness in their enterprises – the opposite of bullying – and work with their people to co-create a Culture of Kindness by discovering and extending what works or what is good.

- **Engage People from the Heart**: Kind Leaders take the time to engage their people from the heart, which means taking them of the dance floor regularly to discuss matters which are deeply important to them. Kind Leaders involve their people in shaping the future of the Enterprise, starting with questions such as who are we, what do we care about and what is our destiny together? Kind leaders treat every person as a unique human being and they help each person to be more of who they uniquely are at work and yet manage to align these talents and
differences around authentic relationships and high trust team work. Kind Leaders build and sustain caring, compassionate community at the core of the Enterprise.

• **Coach (Kind) Virtuous Behaviour.** At the heart of the industrial leadership model is the idea of performance as ‘you get what you deserve’ and you invest to get a big return or reward for your efforts and you pay out only what you have merited; it is a system exclusively about merit based on inputs and outputs, with the idea of putting in as little as possible (inputs) for the maximum return and everything must have a tangible benefit.

‘Hard evidence’ is already emerging of the positive impact of virtuousness or kindness correlating with the ‘bottom line’ of the business; evidence of direct impact on innovation, quality, turnover and customer retention and profit margins. Organisational virtuousness & performance are positively related. An investigation into the financial services sector found that 45% of the variance in six measures of financial performance was accounted for by the implementation of positive processes. (Source – Sarah Lewis)

### 4. **Appreciative Inquiry (AI) - A Way to Discover & Extend Kindness in Organisations, Creating Positive Enterprises**

Many business improvement methodologies focus on what’s broken or not working. Traditional business change or service process improvement methodologies, concentrate on problems and energy is spent on fixing what is broken or prevent bad from happening. The focus is on returning to the status quo. The world view is that of diagnosis; identify the root cause of something e.g. bullying and fix it.

Evidence is now on the board table that many of these problem solving initiatives fail to deliver or achieve less than promised because they create distrust and a culture of blame and buck passing. They also try to isolate problems thereby breaking down the connections between people which are the source of positive community, creativity and collaboration in enterprises and communities.

Focusing on problems closes down the thinking processes around creativity and innovation because the goal is to return to the status quo, not on looking outside the existing box. The driver of this behaviour is fear and the goal is control and unfortunately many of our managers operate from this mindset because this is what they have been taught, what they have experienced and what is measured; they have been taught deficit or industrial leadership.

Instead, AI looks to discover what people like best about the topic of inquiry, the service or each other as team members or customers. It connects people, team members and customers in authentic engaging conversations around stories of when the topic has been at its best.

Listening to these stories gives hope and releases creative energy; firstly to discover the unique strengths of the Enterprise, team or service etc. and then to envision new possibilities by building on this positive core and then aligning Enterprise around these strengths. Usually the whole Enterprise or a representative group is involved in discovering strengths, envisioning what’s possible by extending these strengths and what needs to change to get there. Because people on the ‘ground floor’ are involved in contributing to the design of the changes, they develop high engagement with what is proposed and you see a rich and diverse range of ideas and possibilities emerge.
AI is built around four conversations: discover, dream, design and deliver. The process is highly interactive, with participants interviewing each other to identify peak experiences and strengths through positive stories, meaningful to them. Here is an example:

**Discover:** When have you experienced Random Acts of Kindness in our Enterprise and what are the themes around what these are, how they occur and why?

**Dream:** What is possible if we extended our Random Acts of Kindness so this became the normal experience for us, not just random but as part of everyday experience as a *Culture of Kindness*; what are the opportunities?

**Design:** What will we decide to do to extend our kindness strengths including what existing practices will we extend, what will we stop doing and what new things will we do?

**Deliver:** What will be our priorities and plan of action to implement our own unique Culture of Kindness?

Appreciative Inquiry as a practice can be easily taught and transferred to others, such as the World Kindness Ambassadors, to facilitate the development of sustainable Cultures of Kindness within their own businesses, organisations or communities.

As, Bill Taylor said in the Harvard Business Review recently, ‘it is more important in business to be kind than clever’ and now we have the means to extend random acts of kindness to become the mainstream culture in our marketplace and enterprises.

[http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2012/08/its_more_important_to_be_kind.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2012/08/its_more_important_to_be_kind.html)