

# CONVENTION CENTERS: LEADING WITH KINDNESS

By Carrie Paolone, CMP, CEM, CVP



Over the course of my career, I have come to read many how-to books on the subjects of leadership, motivating employees, and showing them the path towards realizing their greatness. While I can always browse the shelves of my favourite bookstore for a new best-seller or a popular fantasy fiction series, I tend to gravitate in the direction of books on leadership, basically because I thrive on leading teams of people to try harder and do better.

I have titled myself an “empathetic badass,” which is my way of owning my greatest strength and fulfilling my duty to recognize the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of others around me. Before I came full circle in identifying with this title, I had to spend a bit of time trying to understand if I could be successful at practicing it in my professional life. I think I can say that the moment I decided to fully embrace it was when a long-time friend and mentor spoke to me about empathy and kindness as leadership qualities.

Kindness Leadership, as it’s been appropriately named, is a kind of style that fits so instinctively with the type of person I am. I believe that for the majority of people kindness is already innately within them, waiting to come out but often suppressed due to fears of looking soft or weak. So instead of fighting against ourselves and the kindness we want to show, embrace it like I did by bringing the following items into play.

## MR. GRUMPY PANTS

The people who are usually the hardest to be nice to, like Mr. Grumpy Pants, need it the most. A little kindness towards these people can go a long way in turning their negative attitude around, even when your kindness might be met with resistance at first. When we are faced with a person who is constantly unhappy, especially an antagonistic colleague, it’s only natural for us to follow their lead and respond accordingly. Try instead to gently nudge at the reason for their hostility by showing him or her a little empathy, because it’s possible there is something happening in that person’s life which may be deeply affecting them. The hidden struggle he or she is living with could have to do with a sick family member, financial stress, or some bad news that has turned their whole world upside down. You have

nothing to lose by lending an ear, and if a change in them doesn’t immediately show, know that you’ve still done a good thing. Never underestimate how meaningful the offer of listening can be to a person who just wants someone to hear them out. I have recommended this approach to my staff when they deal with difficult people, suggesting they don’t get sucked in and escalate the situation unnecessarily. I advise they listen carefully for emotion in the person’s voice, find compassion in what he or she is saying, and lastly offer kind words that demonstrate understanding.

*“Be kind to unkind people, they need it the most” – Unknown*

## KINDNESS IS CONTAGIOUS

One small act of kindness can inspire someone to follow the example you’ve set. Think about the wave at a baseball game. It usually starts with one or two people, and before you know it the whole stadium has joined in. Kindness can work that way too, with a contagiousness that spreads like wildfire. Even something simple like smiling at someone, giving a genuine compliment, or asking about his or her day can completely change that person’s mood and lift them up to higher spirits. I’m a big fan of Random Act of Kindness Day, except my only wish would be that we celebrate it more often than one day a year. When I see the way in which people randomly give something of themselves on this one particular day, without asking for anything in return, I’m reminded of the difference kindness can make in the lives of others. Don’t wait for a special day that comes once a year to spread the pay-it-forward effect throughout your venue. Have it start with you, move on to your staff and colleagues, and watch with glee as it trickles down to your clients and guests. Who doesn’t want happy clients and guests, am I right?

*“Remember there’s no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.” – Scott Adams*

## KINDNESS STARTS WITH YOU

Kindness has to start somewhere, and it should be with you. An important quality that leaders possess is their ability to take initiative when nothing has been asked of them. If you feel your venue's culture can benefit from more kindness, then you have to step up and be the role model that your venue needs. The good news is that, once you've set the example, the wave will eventually hit everyone and take on a life of its own. While this all might sound relatively simple, in reality, expect there to be a few people who frankly don't care to keep the momentum going. Believe it or not, it happens at baseball games too, where Mr. Grumpy Pants will just sit there in his seat refusing to raise his arms as the wave passes through his section. Still, resist pointing fingers at him and others who are not following suit. Be patient. Rome wasn't built in a day, and seeing acts of kindness spread across your company won't happen that fast either. Kindness will circulate in time, and when it does, appreciate what you've started.

*"A warm smile is the universal language of kindness."* – William Arthur Ward

## KINDNESS DOESN'T HAVE AN EGO

Kindness cannot and must not be fake. For it to have the desired effect, it has to come across as genuine. When an act of kindness looks like it's coming from a good place, the recipient will usually react with surprise and gratitude. If that same person reacts instead with a look of suspicion, it typically means he or she does not completely trust the sincerity of your words or actions. I would guess we've all had this happen to us, where someone says something you think to be either a white lie or just lip service. I like to believe that in all my years of experience I've proven to be pretty decent at sniffing out a fake compliment. Nonetheless, find the strength to withstand calling out that person's insincerity, since it is likely their intentions were good. Practicing kindness can be a lot like taking criticism, some personalities find it harder to swallow than others. The last

thing you want to do as a kindness leader is to stop encouraging those in your professional circle from being kind because their first few experiences didn't go exactly as planned. With that being said, leaders and participants who set these acts in motion shouldn't expect to see them paid back right away. To me there's something morally amiss about keeping score, or even hinting to a colleague that he or she reciprocate your kind deed. I would also avoid the temptation to make a spectacle out of your kindness, wherein you're doing it as a way to be seen and acknowledged. The pleasure you derive from carrying out the act is the true source of satisfaction, not the possibility that you might get a high five from your staff for making a kind gesture. Kindness needs to be performed for its own sake, as if it came naturally to you. If it doesn't, let it be a reminder it's time to get your ego in check.

*"Carry out a random act of kindness, with no expectation of reward, safe in the knowledge that one day someone might do the same for you."*  
– Princess Diana

These days, my growth as a leader has been dedicated less to what I can learn and more to what I can develop. I've found that learning has and will always be present in my life, regardless of whether or not I'm ready to acquire a new skill or information. A growth mindset on the other hand requires developing more of a mental playbook, something that has been planned, practiced, and accepted by your team. Fortunately, my venue's team has taken kindly to playing by my game plan, trusting me as their leader to show them that kindness can triumph over all.

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