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NEWSLETTER · IN CONVERSATION WITH SARAH BROWNING

Kindness isn't the same as being nice

Sarah Browning — Kindness Cheerleader and founder of Time for Kindness — on why kindness is a strong business skill rather than a fluffy one, where accountability fits inside it, and what the research says about happier teams.

Sarah Browning spent more than 25 years in internal communications, much of it at Cancer Research UK, before going freelance and working mainly with charities and universities. She used to describe her clients as people with visions of a better world. Then, on a bench by the River Thames in late 2020, after a bike ride and a pandemic's worth of unease, she asked herself the obvious follow-up: what does she mean by better? The answer was kindness, and the job title she gave herself followed from it.

> **It isn't kind to set someone up to fail, or just to leave someone to fail and flounder.**
>
> — Sarah Browning, on Pharma Prescribed

From a bench to a programme

Time for Kindness started as Sarah playing with Instagram, a platform her then 13-year-old daughter taught her to use. For roughly a year she simply shared small things she saw while going about her day. It has since grown into a wellbeing programme, a community of Kindness Ambassadors and workshops for teams. Her stated limit on all of it: this isn't toxic positivity. Unkind things happen. Her argument is that they aren't the only story, and that a narrative made entirely of bad behaviour risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Kindness is not niceness

Sarah's most useful distinction for a workplace audience. Being nice is pleasant and, in her words, tends to be more surface level. Being kind sometimes means holding someone to their objectives, as long as it's done supportively. Leaving a colleague to flounder isn't kind to them, and it isn't kind to the rest of the team, who usually end up absorbing the work. She also argues kindness is hard rather than weak: pausing to ask what the kind thing would be is difficult against a to-do list and a set of targets. Her side suggestion is to rebrand "soft skills" as human skills, since there is nothing soft about the effort.

What the evidence says

Adam put the data-minded listener's obvious question to her, and Sarah pointed to a growing body of academic work. She cited University of Warwick research finding that employees in kinder cultures were happier, and that happier employees were more productive, putting the uplift at up to around 20% while noting the Warwick figure may be a little lower than a similar Canadian study. She also described a study she attributed to Harvard in which leaders who actively modelled a kind culture found difficult conversations easier, because the trust was already built. She offered to share the links after recording, which is a sensible habit for anyone quoting percentages.

Small enough to actually do

Sarah's view of change management is that big transformation feels impossible, so make the first step small. Teams in her workshops often end up opening each meeting by sharing an example of kindness. The sales figures still get discussed, but from a better starting point. For individuals, the Kindness Ambassador pledge is two lines: notice at least one act of kindness each week, and tell at least one other person about it. She also recommends leaving yourself reminders when things are going well, such as a Post-it in the kitchen, because it is hardest to look up for kindness when you are most anxious. Her favourite hunting grounds are shops, public transport and, less obviously, the office itself.

QUICKFIRE ROUND

Advice to her younger self: Keep believing in her approach. Early in her career a senior colleague stripped the enthusiasm out of an email to a US organisation she wanted to learn from. It came back dry, and she never heard from them again.

Top qualities for building a team: Empathy, genuine difference (not as a tick-box exercise), and connection.

Favourite thing outside work: Family and friends, walks outdoors, and painting, which she returned to during COVID.

Favourite word: Not kindness, but "together."

Golden rule, in life and business: Be a pleasant person to work with. Not a people pleaser, but someone whose interactions leave people in a more positive place, so they want to work with you again.

Listen to the full episode

Sarah Browning on Pharma Prescribed — at pharmaprescribed.com and wherever you get your podcasts.

Sarah Browning is a Kindness Cheerleader and communicator, and founder of the Time for Kindness wellbeing programme (2021). She has a 25-year career in internal communications and engagement. Find her at timeforkindness.co.uk, and on Instagram and LinkedIn as Time for Kindness.