*"For an effervescent life, keep your thoughts fearless, your emotions constructive and your actions venturesome…"*

# The Perils of 'Nice':
# How being 'Nice' can Seriously Undermine Leadership Capability (and what we should do instead)

I am going to jump out on a limb and just say it. Nice can really get in the way of getting a job done.

Not always, not with reasonable people in reasonable circumstances. But sometimes, in management and leadership roles, we aren't always dealing with 'reasonable'. We come across unreasonable people, unreasonable expectations, unreasonable conduct. And in these situations, if 'nice' was going to work, it would have already.

To put this into context, let's create a shared understanding of the meaning of 'nice'. It is one of those conceptual terms that can mean a lot of things depending on the behaviour criteria we attribute to it. The characteristics of nice are 'pleasing and agreeable' (Dictionary.com). Let's think about that for a moment. Pleasing and agreeable. What kind of behaviours do you attribute to those ways of being? Trying to agree and find mutual solutions? Not pushing the point? Biting your tongue so as not to cause an argument? Not saying what really needs to be said to avoid hurt feelings or the dreaded 'difficult conversation'? Not wanting to appear aggressive or forthright? Not putting a comment forward in case it 'rocks the boat'?



Image credit: https://agasiorowski.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/social-rejection/

These behaviours are driven by the need to 'people please'. This, in-turn, is driven by our need to be liked by others. In general, most of us do not need to be adored by others, or even invited out for coffee, but we do enjoy the feeling of knowing we are at least respected professionally. In fact, this need for connection is so strong that it is biological. We now know that when people experience social rejection, they experience it in the same part of the brain that registers physical pain. Thus being excluded, bullied, or facing a difficult interpersonal situation is painful-literally! The old adage 'suffering from a broken heart' was not too far off when we consider this research.
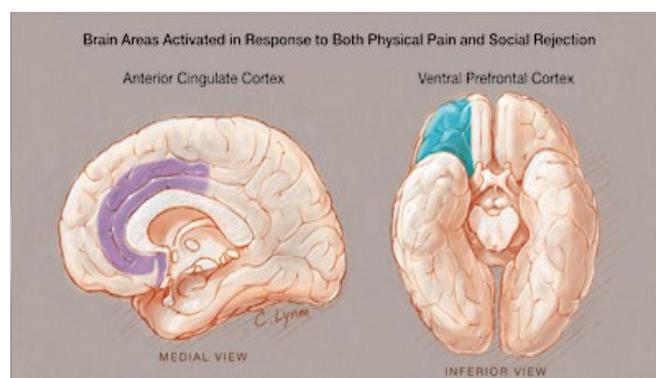
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# The Perils of 'Nice': Leadership vs. Being Nice

Researchers including Brene Brown (vulnerability expert), David Rock (who developed the SCARF threat and reward model) and Martin Seligman ('Father' of Positive Psychology) have studied this in depth to find that social connection is a very powerful motivator for human behaviour. In fact it is a central ingredient in a happy and fulfilled life.

In management and leadership, we accept the responsibility of ensuring that we can accomplish what is necessary for ourselves, our team and ultimately, our organisation. As a result, primary aspects of our position are to make decisions, give feedback, treat risks (human or otherwise) and conduct performance management. A side-effect of these elements however, is that not everyone will be happy with our decisions 100% of the time, particularly if we are making big and bold decisions or changes that will be better in the longer term, but rock people's sense of the status quo in the meantime. Put simply, we are not paid to keep people happy all of the time. We are paid to meet objectives.

This is a very precarious tightrope to tread for several reasons. Firstly we know that a positive team with high trust and high morale is more likely to also be high performing. Secondly, as discussed, we have an innate drive to be liked and to be connected. Unfortunately, the issue arises when we do not realise that these two aspects are actually competing at times and we confuse keeping our team positive, with needing to be nice. They are not one and the same. In fact, 'nice' often competes with what we know about leadership in high performing contexts. As a result, we know that the drive for human connection and 'being liked' can overtake our capacity and capability to achieve the task at hand.

*We get into trouble when we confuse the skills needed to keep our team positive, productive and performing, with being 'nice'.*

Research has long confirmed six key factors of leadership influence. These are to motivate and engage staff by building the following within a team: flexibility (ability to innovate); a sense of responsibility to the organisation; high standards; useful feedback and meaningful acknowledgment; shared values and goals, and commitment to a common purpose (Harvard Business Review, 2011. Goleman, 2000).



"Nobody rises to low expectations."
—Calvin Loyd
livingtree
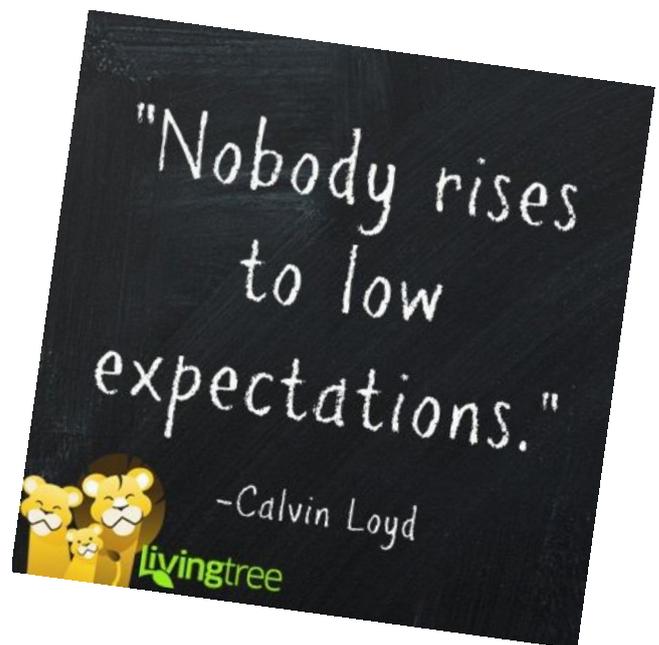
It is easy to see how any of these will not always marry easily with 'nice'. Just to be clear, I am not advocating the consistent use of the 'commander' or 'directive' styles of leadership. We know that these are not particularly effective outside of the armed forces. Nor am I suggesting we throw away common courtesy. On the contrary. Courtesy and respect should form the foundation of what we do and how we do it.

# The Perils of 'Nice': Responsive vs. Reactive

To quote Marcus Buckingham, "the job of a manager, meanwhile, is to turn one person's particular talent into performance" (Buckingham, 2005). In setting high performance standards, one must also be corrective if these standards are not met. Depending on the perspective of the person receiving the feedback, they may receive it with thanks (great! Now I can do my role even better!), with resentment (who are you to tell me how to do my job?) or embarrassment and shame. While we can certainly shape our delivery style to match our positive intentions, we cannot shape the meaning someone gives our words once they leave our mouths. Similarly, modelling a sense of responsibility to the organisation may also mean saying no every now and then. No to leave, or flex or no to ideas that do not meet objectives.

The simple truth is: if we are doing our job well, not everyone will think we are nice. This is usually one of the toughest things people have to adjust to when they first begin a leadership role. Some people never quite leap over this chasm to realise that 'nice' is so much less important that being fair, consistent, reasonable and emotionally intelligent. Joel Brockner (2006, Harvard Business Review), highlights that while many managers say they want to foster 'creativity and innovation', they often fail to achieve this through a lack of perceived fairness in the process and a lack of attitudinal consistency in their approach to people (treating people with dignity and respect).

People are fickle. We change our minds relatively easily and sometimes quickly and often. Our thoughts are influenced by so many factors. Our mood, our physiology (sleep, hunger, wellness), our recent interactions and even the colours we see can all influence how we respond at any one point in time. What we accept today, we may reject tomorrow and vice-versa. Because of this, people-pleasing is a losing battle and 'being nice' falls into this category.

'Nice' often leads us to being reactive to the person or event in front of us, rather than responsive to the bigger picture. 'Nice' means trying to anticipate what will make someone pleased at any given point and adjusting ourselves to be



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agreeable and amenable in our demeanour and decisions to allow this to happen. By being 'nice' we may lower standards, say yes when we mean no, let deadlines slip, or walk past bad behaviour. 'Nice' also leads to some pretty deep wells of resentment over time if it is not returned or appreciated.

# The Perils of 'Nice': Conclusion

My argument is to put down the flimsy baton of 'nice'. If we clutch it, and try to pass it around, it just fails under the many and varied team and organisational pressures of being a manager and leader. Instead of passing around 'nice' in reaction to circumstances, we are better off keeping our hands free and embodying the robust human elements of fairness, consistency and emotional intelligence. When these shape what we do and how we do it, we keep the bigger picture in mind and are therefore far more strategic in our decision making. Our team can relax, knowing that we will respond to each circumstance with clear and transparent values and they do not have to 'test our mood' before coming to speak with us. An added bonus is that we also reserve far more energy because we are not contorting ourselves in a fruitless effort to please fickle and changeable people.

In my work I see many 'nice' managers finding themselves in pretty deep water. Through 'being nice' they inadvertently set up relationship expectations that cannot survive the demands of their role. There comes a point where they find themselves needing to give performance feedback, or needing to say no or set boundaries and this leads to significant stress and anxiety as energy is consumed worrying about how they will be viewed by others in these circumstances. Often 'nice' managers fail to have the tough conversations. They avoid giving corrective feedback or dealing with unpleasant issues and these small avoidances have a cumulative and compounding impact. Fairly quickly, small issues become big ones and little 'one-off' behaviours become habitual within the team. The 'nice' manager can start to drown in the sea of pleasantries they have unknowingly created.

### In Conclusion

*'Nice' might work in the moment. But used as a foundation for team morale and performance, it will crumble into dust under the pressure. When we behave with respect and courtesy, and embody fairness, consistency and emotional intelligence, we cultivate far greater, deeper outcomes, organisationally and for team morale and performance, than 'being nice' ever could.*

Abby Elizabeth Rees is PunkPDs director, a self-confessed 'education junkie', University Lecturer, Education and Empowerment Writer, Behaviour and Change Specialist, Executive Meta-Coach and artistic thinker.

Energy, Excellence and Tenacity capture Abby's drive and personality.

Thriving on new challenges to design for education and change, Abby leads with a level of energy that earned her the nickname '240' (240 Volt) from her former colleagues. With the tenacity of a Rottweiler, Abby lives and breathes her design projects, providing her clients with a commitment to excellence that is unparalleled. Abby has a lively personal presence, strong interpersonal skills and uses a wide range of innovative and inventive techniques. With rich experience in facilitating diverse groups, Abby has delivered a range of corporate training and developed education, change and communication tools to meet individual needs.

In addition to being recognised with numerous National and International awards for her work, Abby embodies the cliché of 'life-long-learning' and has achieved:

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Bachelor of Education: Inclusive Education

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