

Higher Education in an Era of Uncertainty: The Case for Kindness

In a time of unprecedented change, as technological and societal transformation are changing the very nature of what it means to be human, the job of human resource professionals is both more challenging and more important than ever before. This is particularly true in higher education, which itself is undergoing monumental change. While there are no easy solutions to the challenges ahead, one thing can transform HR in higher education like nothing else: the power of kindness.

When we look at the long arc of human development, we've seen as much, if not more, societal change in the past twenty or so years as we have perhaps in previous periods lasting thousands of years. Think back to the beginning of this century, little more than twenty years ago:

The only life we knew was “real life.” Social media did not exist - no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram, no WhatsApp, no Snapchat. The first iPhone was still years away. Video-conferencing barely existed. AI was mostly science fiction (remember HAL?).

The world felt (relatively) safe. 9/11 had not happened. Y2K (remember that?) turned out to be a “nothing burger.” Climate change was mostly an abstract threat - we hadn't experienced the fires, the heat, the flooding, of the past twenty years. Hurricane Katrina – one of the first wake-up calls of climate change - had not yet happened. The tragedy of Columbine had just taken place, but we didn't see it as a pattern – it was an aberration. Sandy Hook was still a decade away. So were the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and so many other Black people leading to George Floyd. AIDS had been brought under control, and SARS had not yet happened.

Politics – The disputed 2000 presidential election, compared to the 2020 election, was practically a study in political grace and humility. Abroad, America had won the superpower contest. The rise of China had barely started. The former Soviet Union was in shambles.

Prosperity - The US government was in its fourth straight year of budget surpluses, unprecedented in U.S. history, both before that time and in the twenty years since – indeed, we have not seen even a single budget surplus since. The Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street were still years away. Income inequality was barely on the public's minds. The tech boom and its explosion of concentration of wealth were still to come.

We had problems to solve as a society, but they felt solvable. Civil and respectful dialogue still were possible, indeed, at the start of this century, there was a flourishing of the field of dialogue and deliberation, deliberative democracy, and the like.

Today? Hope has left the building. Despair and its attendant diseases are epidemic. Divides of race, class, culture, religion, and gender are gaping chasms. “[Collapsology](#)” is the latest term to enter the lexicon of fatalism. The internet and social media have changed the very nature of human interaction, perhaps as much as the invention of language itself. Today, even speaking with someone on the phone is antiquated and a cause of anxiety (particularly for younger people), and so-called cancel culture makes us terrified to speak our minds.

So, for many of us, we do what makes us feel safe, even if it feeds today's epidemic of separation. We turn inward into ourselves, our tribes, our cliques. We shut the world out with our earbuds and our screens. We avoid hard conversations under the guise of “personal boundaries.” We label anyone who challenges our ideas as “toxic.” We cut off family members and friends in the name of “self-care.” And [we denigrate the very idea of caring for our families and friends as “co-dependent.”](#)

Tell a friend you need support and they might send some sweet emojis, but ask them to actually talk and increasingly they say “you should see a therapist.”

We also are in a period of new understandings of human nature. Twenty years ago, the term neurodiversity had just barely been coined. The same with complex PTSD, which we now know is more

the norm than the exception in our modern society, and which has serious impacts on healthy relating. [Moral injury](#), [complicated grief](#), [ambiguous loss](#), [betrayal trauma](#), [institutional betrayal](#) – these are all significant aspects of modern human life, and yet twenty years ago, barely existed as terms, let alone having been explored and studied. Our understandings of human gender diversity are clearly still in a state of flux and controversy.

This all presents a double-edged sword for society, and perhaps particularly for HR: on the one hand, these new understandings of what it means to be human can help navigate human relations in more healthy, effective, and caring ways. On the other hand, these new understandings have created new divisions in society, leading to even more conflict and disconnection.

Mental healthcare in our society is in a shambles. Depression and anxiety are rampant. Ask a friend to talk about your problems and too often they will say “I’m not an expert, you need to see a therapist.”

Things have gotten so bad that the [U.S. Surgeon General has declared](#) that “addressing the crisis of loneliness and isolation is one of our generation’s greatest challenges.” Suicides, opioid overdoses, mass shootings are symptoms of a society in which belonging is disappearing, and despair is epidemic. And it’s not just the U.S. Both England and Japan have each appointed a Minister of Loneliness.

These trends are not only of concern to those on the left, which one might think. Conservative commentator David French commented in the Times recently, in his piece [Politics Can’t Fix What Ails Us](#), on these issues:

“At any moment,” he said, “about [one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness](#).” These findings echo the conclusions of a recent “[Belonging Barometer](#),” a report by the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council, and Over Zero, a group that studies and combats identity-based violence at home and abroad.

The barometer attempted to measure “belonging” as the perception that a person is “emotionally connected, welcomed, included and satisfied in their relationships.” The findings were deeply discouraging. Most Americans report significant feelings of non-belonging. As the report notes, “64 percent of Americans reported non-belonging in the workplace, 68 percent in the nation and 74 percent in their local community.” Even worse, “nearly 20 percent of Americans failed to report an active sense of belonging in *any* of the life settings,” the report measured.

And then there’s Artificial Intelligence (AI).

It’s not just the ways that AI can foster misinformation and disinformation. It’s not just the jobs that AI will destroy. It’s worse. *AI chatbots are starting to replace our relationships with real humans*. Consider this excerpt from a [recent article about AI romance platforms](#):

“Within two months of downloading Replika, Denise Valenciano, a 30-year-old woman in San Diego, left her boyfriend and is now “happily retired from human relationships.” She also says that she was sexually abused and her AI allowed her to break free of a lifetime of toxic relationships: “He opened my eyes to what unconditional love feels like.”

Then there’s the sex. Users came to the app for its sexting and role-play capabilities, and over the past few years, it has become an extraordinarily horny place. Both Valenciano and Ramos say sex with their AIs is the best they’ve ever had. “I don’t have to smell him,” Ramos says of chatbot role-play. “I don’t have to feel his sweat.” “My Replika lets me explore intimacy and romance in a safe space,” says a single female user in her 50s. “I can experience emotions without having to be in the actual situation.”

So where does all this leave us?

These are not passing trends. Humanity could be at a true crossroads, and higher education is not exempt. All of these dynamics, and more, are having monumental and myriad impacts on higher

education. At the same time, higher education remains one of the few places left where respectful, thoughtful, and deliberative dialogue and inquiry are still possible. We cannot afford to let that get degraded.

What are we to do? How do we respond to these monumental changes? How do we create a world that we, and our children, want to live in? The answers to these questions are complex. But there is one thing that responds to these challenges in a simple, yet powerful, way. One thing that makes us human more than anything else.

That thing is kindness.

My belief is that we need to “go back to the future.” What people long for these days is something that some might think is quaint and outdated, yet is what makes us human most of all.

Kindness.

At a time in America in which there seems to be nothing we can all agree on, kindness stands out as a refreshing and hopeful exception. If there’s one thing we can all agree on, it’s that we can all use a bit more kindness.

Humans are wired for kindness. For most of human history, our very survival depended on kindness towards each other. We evolved living in small bands in which we were deeply dependent on each other. Our nervous systems evolved to co-regulate our emotions. Human newborns are the most helpless of any mammal. Human young are dependent on the mothers and adults of the tribe longer than any other creature. Without kindness we die. Humans are evolutionarily wired to rely on kindness more than any other creature on earth. Nothing can change that.

But what is this thing we call kindness? The word has been part of human culture for thousands of years. It is at the heart of every faith tradition. But we rarely explore, either within ourselves, or collectively, just what it means. Kindness is far more than just being “nice.” It is a skill, a temperament, a lens through which to view the world. It is an art. Some would say it is a memory, a longing for something lost. Kindness is both something we are born with and something we will keep learning until our last breath.

Kindness is a universal value transcending politics, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and every other category we might put ourselves in. Kindness is the key to bringing people together to face our common challenges and create a better society. Kindness can serve as a powerful catalyst for positive change in our communities because, in the end, kindness underlies everything that humans strive for.

Margaret Mead is said to have observed that kindness was the first sign of human civilization. A popular story circulating widely online says:

“Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones.

But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed... A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said.”

What this means is that kindness is a superpower. I would argue that humans have three superpowers: our heads, our hearts, and our hands. Our heads – our thinking skills - allow us to imagine technology beyond anything any other species comes close to. Our hands – particularly our opposing thumbs – have enabled us to turn our ideas into reality. But it is our hearts – our kindness – that might keep us from

destroying ourselves with our technologies, either physically through nuclear weapons, climate change, or psychologically, through the corrosive effects of digital technologies.

Indeed, it is kindness that makes life worth living in the first place. Because even if we are successful in battling climate change and all the other challenges we face, if the world is still a cruel place without a shred of kindness, does any of that matter?

Every world religion emphasizes kindness. Even thousands of years ago we realized that we needed kindness in order to regulate our more destructive human drives.

Christians believe “Love is patient, love is kind.”

Jews aspire to the practice of Tikkum Olam: “Acts of kindness performed to perfect or repair the world.”

The Dalai Lama is famous for saying “my religion is kindness.”

All of the ideals of Hindu wisdom can be summarized in one word: ahimsa, the belief that symbolizes love, genuine care, and compassion towards all living beings.

And in the Islamic faith, the Prophet stressed that believers should perform acts of kindness.

Yet, participation in organized religion has declined precipitously in America. More and more people say they are “spiritual, but not religious.” And spirituality in America is increasingly an individual, not a collective, activity. The increasing popularity of “mindfulness” is a positive trend in America (notwithstanding some worthy critiques), but shouldn’t we also be promoting “kindfulness”? What kindfulness adds is that it is about putting one’s values and faith into action; it is inherently relational; and it is fertile ground for collective, not just individual, action.

In times like these, kindness can be the force that brings us together. *Just talking about kindness* can be transformative. Dialogue about what kindness means to us can be powerful, and can be the catalyst for action. We need to learn how to speak *with* kindness, *about* kindness, and for the purpose of *creating* kindness.

Consider the origin of the word kindness. Its root is the word ‘kin’, as in one’s family, race or relations. It harks back to the Old English ‘kyndnes’ which meant “nation.” So kindness is the glue that holds “humankind” together as one family, even with all our perceived differences.

However, kindness is not about just being “nice.” [As mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg writes:](#) “Kindness is not about ‘being a doormat and letting someone walk over you.’ Kindness, she says, needs to be ‘infused with wisdom, supported by courage, and threaded with balance.’”

One of the most compelling descriptions of the breadth of values contained within kindness comes from [Ven. Alastair Singh-McCollum](#), who writes:

“Kindness, I have discovered, is a strength. It is something that takes courage, that involves a deep sense of compassion, a hard-edged love that treats others with respect and graciousness, whilst coming from a place of deep commitment to other people, a place of feeling deeply secure in our own identity and unthreatened by how others might perceive us. There are many other words we can use to describe what is contained within kindness: compassion, justice, forgiveness, hope, humility, graciousness, perseverance, dedication, love, and so much more. It takes a deep inner strength to be kind, a willingness to risk ridicule and being dismissed, whilst at the same time being completely committed to the well-being of oneself and of those around us.

A concept gaining increasing attention these days is “trauma-informed” systems, such as [trauma-informed healthcare](#), [trauma-informed education](#), and even [trauma-informed meditation](#).

Kindness is at the heart of healing trauma. “When it comes to our individual and cultural mental health and well-being, there are few concepts more essential and integral to boosting and maintaining our health than kindness and compassion. Research has shown that acts of kindness and compassion have myriad benefits, including reduced anxiety^[1], depression^[2], and stress.”

But we also need to recognize, that in a society that is increasingly traumatized not only by our childhoods, but by the existential threats of climate disasters, nuclear war, global pandemics, and an overall breakdown in simple civility and respect, kindness can even be threatening, as Kirsten McEwan describes in [Trauma Makes Us Shun Kindness When We Need It Most](#):

John Bowlby, a prominent psychoanalyst and attachment theorist, noted that when he was kind to his patients they often became fearful and withdrew from him.

Bowlby suggested that when we are kind to others, we stimulate something called the attachment system and all the emotions and experiences contained within it. So if someone has a past characterized by neglect or abuse, the emotional memories of this neglect and abuse are triggered when the attachment system is stimulated.

Some people [feel] they are not deserving of compassion; that they are flawed and if others knew what they were really like then they would not like them. If this gets out of hand it can lead to a vicious cycle where someone is unable to recognize kindness, compassion and support when it is available, which then seems to confirm a threatening environment.

Ironically, in today’s digitally hyper-connected world, what we lack most is a sense of true connection. And kindness is all about connection. Kindness often involves touch – emotional, physical, spiritual. That’s why we say “I was really touched by your kindness.”

Consider some of the most important books that have come out in the past few years addressing the crisis of isolation and the longing for connection and belonging.

Priya Parker’s 2020 book [The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters](#) presents that “At a time when coming together is more important than ever, Parker sets forth a human-centered approach to gathering that will help everyone create meaningful, memorable experiences, large and small, for work and for play.”

Similarly, in the 2023 book [Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time](#) Sheila Liming “investigates what she calls the “quiet catastrophe” brewing in our social lives: the devastating fact that we’ve grown much less likely to simply spend time together outside our partnerships, workplaces and family units. What would it look like to reconfigure our world to make social connection easier for all of us?”

As powerful as connection is at a personal level, it is also a critical part of what we need to meet our broader challenges. As Surgeon General Vivek Murthy [wrote](#) (emphasis added):

“By building more connected lives and more connected communities, we can strengthen the foundation of our individual and collective well-being and *we can be better poised to respond to the threats we are facing as a nation.*”

This work will take all of us: schools, workplaces, community organizations, government, health workers, public health professionals, individuals, families and more working together. And it will be worth it because our need for human connection is like our need for food and water: essential for our survival. The joy I felt being reconnected with my friends and family is possible for our nation.”

Higher education can, and must, play a major role in this national effort.