



Kindness as a Relational Capability in Collaborative Work

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Abstract

A growing literature demonstrates that kindness improves individual well-being, meaning, and social connection. This paper adds to such literature by asking if intentional acts of kindness strengthen relationships, psychological safety, and supportive norms within collaborative teams. It draws on a field experiment embedded within a three-month problem-driven learning program involving eighteen participants working in teams on real public problems. These participants undertook intentional acts of kindness toward assigned teammates and subsequently reflected on the acts they gave and received. Findings suggest that relatively small acts of kindness generate substantial relational effects, with participants reporting increased appreciation, support, encouragement, and belonging. The strongest effects occurred when acts demonstrated attention, memory, and understanding. The evidence also suggests that repeated acts contributed to psychological safety and the emergence of norms of mutual support. The paper thus argues that kindness functions not simply as an individual virtue but as a relational capability that helps teams collaborate, learn, and solve problems together. Small acts of kindness appear capable of producing effects that extend beyond individual well-being to influence relationships, team norms, and collaborative performance.

Keywords: kindness, psychological safety, relational capability, teams, organizational behavior, high-quality connections



Introduction

Collaboration is essential across society. Teams are one of the principal organizational forms through which such collaboration occurs. They convene people with different knowledge, experiences, and responsibilities to address shared problems and achieve collective goals. But this work is often difficult. Teams must exchange information, coordinate actions, adapt to changing circumstances, and learn together. Members must share ideas, acknowledge uncertainty, admit mistakes, and ask for help. These activities require more than technical expertise, formal authority, or individual competence. Effective collaboration depends upon trust, support, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Team members must believe that they can contribute, seek assistance, and discuss difficulties without fear of criticism, embarrassment, or exclusion.

Although these relational conditions are widely recognized as important, relatively little attention has been paid to one of their possible foundations: kindness.

A growing literature demonstrates that kindness benefits both those who give and those who receive. Individuals who perform acts of kindness frequently report increased happiness, meaning, social connection, competence, and belonging, while recipients often experience appreciation, gratitude, and stronger social ties (Ko et al., 2021; Regan et al., 2023). Some studies further suggest that kindness may contribute to healthier workplace relationships, supportive cultures, and more positive working environments (Ballatt and Campling, 2011; Boulter et al., 2023).

Yet little is known about how kindness operates within teams engaged in ongoing collaborative work. Most studies examine individuals rather than groups and assess changes in individual well-being rather than team functioning. This leaves an important question unanswered: can kindness help create the relational conditions that effective teams require, particularly trust, support, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Can acts of kindness strengthen these conditions and contribute to how teams learn, collaborate, and perform?

This paper addresses these questions through the analysis of evidence from a field experiment embedded within a three-month problem-driven learning program. Participants worked in teams addressing complex public problems and undertook an exercise in intentional kindness. Each participant was assigned a teammate and asked to offer an act of kindness and subsequently

reflect on both the kindness they gave and the kindness they received. The resulting reflections were treated as documentary evidence and analyzed to examine whether kindness influences both givers and receivers, whether personalized acts generate stronger effects, and whether repeated acts contribute to psychological safety and supportive norms within teams.

Findings suggest that relatively small acts of kindness can generate substantial relational effects within teams. Participants frequently reported feeling appreciated, supported, heard, and valued. The strongest effects occurred when acts demonstrated attention, memory, and understanding, while repeated acts appeared to contribute to psychological safety and supportive norms.

The paper extends the study of kindness from individual outcomes to team processes and argues that kindness should be understood not simply as an individual virtue, but as a relational capability. This capability emerges through repeated acts of attention, recognition, and support that strengthen trust, psychological safety, and reciprocity within teams. Kindness therefore helps create and sustain the relationships upon which learning, collaboration, and collective problem solving depend. In this sense, kindness is not merely a desirable individual characteristic, but an important capability that enables teams to function effectively.

Kindness and Teams

Although kindness is widely valued, it is surprisingly difficult to define. The concept appears in philosophy, psychology, education, healthcare, and organizational studies, with different traditions emphasizing different aspects of the phenomenon:

- At its broadest, kindness can be understood as intentional action directed toward improving another person's well-being. Kindness involves recognizing another person's needs, interests, or vulnerabilities and responding in ways intended to benefit them (Binfet, 2015; Regan et al., 2023). Such actions often require the investment of time, effort, attention, emotional energy, or material resources.
- Research suggests that kindness benefits both those who give and those who receive. Regan et al. (2023) show that acts of kindness produce experiences of meaning, social connection, and competence, while Ko et al. (2021) demonstrate that both performing and recalling acts of kindness generate positive psychological effects. Recipients

frequently report appreciation and stronger social connections, while givers often experience increased happiness, purpose, and belonging.

- Kindness is not simply an emotional disposition or a form of politeness. Binfeet (2015) distinguishes between random and intentional acts of kindness, arguing that meaningful acts often involve reflection, attention, and consideration of the recipient. Kindness may also involve difficult conversations, honest feedback, or accountability when these actions serve another person's well-being (Unwin, 2018; Worline and Dutton, 2017).
- The concept of intelligent kindness further emphasizes the relational nature of kindness. Ballatt and Campling (2011) argue that effective organizations depend upon relationships characterized by trust, care, and mutual support. Similarly, Unwin (2018) and Worline and Dutton (2017) emphasize the importance of empathy, compassion, and human connection within organizations.

When combined, these perspectives suggest that kindness is intentional, relational, and practical. It operates through actions directed toward others, depends upon attention and understanding, and affects both givers and receivers. These characteristics become particularly important in teams, where relationships influence whether individuals share information, seek help, support colleagues, and collaborate effectively.

Can Kindness Promote Team Effectiveness?

Collaborative work is fundamentally relational. Teams coordinate activities, exchange information, solve problems, and respond to uncertainty together. Their effectiveness therefore depends not only upon individual expertise but also upon the quality of relationships among members. Trust, support, and psychological safety frequently shape whether individuals contribute ideas, seek help, admit mistakes, and collaborate effectively. Kindness may contribute to these conditions in several ways:

- First, kindness may benefit recipients and make them more engaged and committed to their team. Research consistently shows that recipients of kind acts experience appreciation, gratitude, and stronger social connections (Ko et al., 2021; Regan et al., 2023). Within teams, such experiences may help individuals feel valued, supported, and included, strengthening their attachment to colleagues and increasing their willingness to participate and contribute.

- Second, kindness may benefit those who give, connecting them more to their team members. Performing acts of kindness has been associated with increased meaning, purpose, competence, and social connection (Ko et al., 2021; Regan et al., 2023). Within teams, acts of kindness may encourage individuals to pay greater attention to colleagues, understand their circumstances, and invest more deeply in team relationships. Such attention and investment may strengthen commitment to teammates and increase willingness to provide support in the future.
- Third, if kindness is personalized it may help build team member cohesion. Binfet (2015) argues that intentional acts frequently require attention to, reflection on, and consideration of the recipient. Within teams, acts that demonstrate memory, understanding, and knowledge of another person's interests or circumstances may communicate recognition and care more effectively than generic acts, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships.
- Fourth, kindness may contribute to psychological safety—a key ingredient of team creativity. Research on psychological safety argues that individuals contribute and perform better when teams are perceived as safe places for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). Because collaboration frequently requires individuals to seek help, acknowledge uncertainty, and admit mistakes, acts of kindness may reduce interpersonal threat and increase expectations of support, making team members more willing to speak openly and participate fully.
- Finally, kindness may contribute to more supportive relationships and stronger relational ties within teams. Research on high-quality connections emphasizes the importance of interactions characterized by support, affirmation, and responsiveness (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003), while positive organizational scholarship highlights the contribution of supportive relationships to trust, learning, and cooperation (Cameron et al., 2003). Repeated acts of kindness may contribute to norms of encouragement, reciprocity, care, and mutual support that influence how team members interact with one another.

These arguments inform five hypotheses:

- *H1: Acts of kindness increase positive affect and appreciation among recipients.* Recipients of intentional acts of kindness are expected to report appreciation, encouragement, support, and feelings of being valued.
- *H2: Acts of kindness increase meaning and connection among givers.* Individuals performing acts of kindness are expected to report increased reflection, meaning, and connection to their teammates.
- *H3: Personalized acts of kindness generate stronger effects than generic acts.* Acts that demonstrate knowledge of the recipient are expected to produce stronger emotional and relational responses than more generic acts.
- *H4: Acts of kindness strengthen psychological safety within teams.* Repeated acts of kindness are expected to strengthen perceptions that teammates are supportive, trustworthy, and willing to help one another.
- *H5: Acts of kindness contribute to supportive relationships and stronger relational ties within teams.* Repeated acts of kindness are expected to contribute to norms of encouragement, reciprocity, care, and mutual support.

Together, these hypotheses move beyond the individual focus that characterizes much of the kindness literature. Rather than asking simply whether kindness improves individual well-being, they ask whether kindness contributes to the relational conditions that enable teams to learn, collaborate, and solve problems collectively.

Research Design

These hypotheses were tested through the analysis of results from a field experiment embedded within a three-month problem-driven learning program involving teams in a state in the United States of America. Participants in this program worked in small teams to address complex public problems, meeting regularly to diagnose challenges, identify responses, and advance collective work in a state in the United States. Teams were thus all engaged in ongoing collaborative tasks characterized by uncertainty, interdependence, and shared responsibility.

An intentional kindness exercise was embedded in each team's work. This involved asking partnered teammates to undertake intentional acts of kindness towards each other across multiple iterations. Team members were given discretion about the nature of these acts, with the only rules being that they had to be non-monetary and had to be completed in specific time periods.

Following each ‘act of kindness’ iteration, team members completed written reflections addressing four questions/prompts: 1. What act of kindness did you offer to your team member? 2. Share your thought process in selecting your act of kindness; 3. What act of kindness did you receive? 4. How did it make you feel? Reflections from the first iteration constituted the primary documentary evidence for this study. Eighteen participants completed these reflections. They provided information on the nature of the acts undertaken, the considerations involved in selecting them, the experiences of both givers and receivers, and the perceived effects of kindness on relationships, psychological safety, and team interactions.

For instance, P was asked to offer an act of kindness to G and received an act of kindness from M. In describing the act of kindness offered, P notes, “I crafted a poem for my teammate, G. I chose poetry because it’s a unique and personal way to convey appreciation. I thought carefully about her vibrant personality and her love for connecting with others, weaving those qualities into each line. My intention was to create something heartfelt that she could keep, hoping the words would resonate with her spirit. Writing the poem also gave me a chance to reflect on our interactions, making the act even more meaningful and sincere.” P then reflected on the act of kindness he received: “M gave me a personal bike wash voucher as an act of kindness, which made me feel really appreciated and understood because she knows how much biking means to me! It wasn’t just a thoughtful gesture—it felt personal, like she took the time to pick something that aligned with my interests. It brightened my day and inspired me to pay it forward to others in a meaningful way!”

Drawing on such commentaries, the study is best understood as a small-cohort field experiment embedded within teams. Small-N studies are common in organizational research when the phenomena of interest are relational, contextual, and difficult to observe directly. Foundational studies of psychological safety examined relatively small numbers of teams (Edmondson, 1996, 1999), while research on high-quality connections and compassion at work frequently relies on intensive analysis of relatively small groups and relationships (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Worline and Dutton, 2017). Influential organizational theories have likewise emerged from small numbers of observations, including Weick’s (1993) study of sensemaking in the Mann Gulch disaster, which drew insights about group dynamics and organizational behavior from a single event involving thirteen firefighters. Such studies seek to develop theory and identify mechanisms rather than achieve statistical generalization.

The design also builds upon experimental studies of kindness. Ko et al. (2021) compared the effects of performing and recalling acts of kindness, while Regan et al. (2023) examined the psychological experiences associated with kindness, including meaning, competence, and social connection. These studies demonstrate that kindness produces distinctive effects for individuals, particularly for those who perform kind acts. However, participants were generally studied outside ongoing teams, collaborative work, or organizational settings. The present study extends this literature by examining whether the effects of kindness also influence relationships, psychological safety, and supportive norms within naturally occurring teams. The present study extends this literature by examining whether the mechanisms identified in previous research operate within collaborative teams engaged in shared work.

Importantly, the unit of analysis in this study is not the team itself, but the interaction between team members. Small relational moments become evidence of larger organizational processes. This follows the logic of the high-quality connection's literature, which argues that relatively brief episodes of support, affirmation, and responsiveness can have consequences that extend well beyond the interaction itself (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). Such moments matter because they shape how individuals perceive one another, whether they expect support, and whether relationships strengthen or weaken over time. The present study treats acts of kindness as precisely such relational episodes. Examining these interactions through the reflections of both givers and receivers allows insight into how small acts of support may contribute to broader team processes, including psychological safety, trust, reciprocity, and supportive norms.

Analytical Method

The 18 participants' responses were analyzed using a blend of deductive and inductive coding. Deductively, responses were coded against the five hypotheses. Particular attention was given to evidence of appreciation, gratitude, feeling valued, connection, meaning, support, reciprocity, psychological safety, and normalization. Inductively, additional themes emerging from the data were identified, including personalization, recognition, encouragement, being seen, attention, memory, and belonging.

Coding focused separately on the act of kindness itself, the experience of the giver, the experience of the receiver, subsequent reflection, and evidence of team-level effects:

- To assess the psychological safety hypothesis, responses were examined for evidence that participants felt more comfortable seeking help, admitting difficulties, discussing struggles, or supporting teammates experiencing challenges. Statements emphasizing grace, understanding, accountability, mutual support, and being "in this together" were treated as indicators of psychological safety.
- The analysis of personalization compared acts that relied heavily on prior knowledge of recipients with acts that were more generic in nature. Particular attention was given to differences in emotional responses and perceived meaning.
- Normalization was examined by identifying evidence that acts generated broader expectations of helping, support, reciprocity, or care within teams. Particular attention was given to whether kindness became discussed, reinforced, and expected rather than remaining an isolated event.
- The analytical objective was therefore not simply to identify whether kindness produced positive emotions, but to understand the mechanisms through which small acts of kindness influence relationships, psychological safety, and emerging team norms within collaborative settings.

Findings

The findings from this analysis provide strong support for the proposition that relatively small acts of kindness can generate meaningful individual and team-level effects. Across the eighteen participants, acts of kindness were overwhelmingly personalized and relational and the intervention produced evidence consistent with all five hypotheses, although some received stronger support than others.

H1: Acts of kindness increase positive affect and appreciation among recipients

This hypothesis receives strong support. Evidence comes from participants' written reflections on acts of kindness they received. Of the 18 participants, 15 reported receiving an act of kindness and described its effects. All such descriptions referenced positive emotional responses.

The most frequently reported responses were appreciation, feeling valued, gratitude, encouragement, and feelings of connection. Approximately 70 percent of recipients explicitly used terms such as *appreciated*, *grateful*, *valued*, or *supported*, while over half described feeling

understood, heard, or recognized. Several participants used particularly strong language. One participant simply stated: *“I felt appreciated.”* Another wrote: *“I was sooo grateful for her thoughtfulness and caring.”* A third reported: *“He made me feel special and heard and a big part of our team.”* Another participant reflected that the act made him feel *“appreciated and understood.”* Finally, one participant described receiving a personalized card as *“very uplifting.”*

Importantly, recipients emphasized what the acts communicated, frequently noting that another team member had remembered a personal interest, noticed an achievement, recognized a challenge, or invested time and attention in understanding them. This pattern is particularly visible in the more personalized acts. One participant received an image of an antelope after discussing participation in a recent hunting scholarship program and reported feeling *“special and heard and a big part of our team.”* Another participant received a bicycle-related gift connected to a personal interest and reported feeling *“appreciated and understood.”* A participant who received a culturally meaningful card simply reported: *“I felt appreciated.”*

The evidence therefore suggests that recipient effects were both widespread and consistent. The dominant responses were appreciation, gratitude, encouragement, support, and feelings of being valued. Moreover, participants frequently interpreted the acts not primarily as gifts or favors but as signals that another team member had paid attention, remembered something important, and invested effort in understanding them.

H2: Acts of kindness increase meaning and connection among givers

The evidence also provides strong support for the second hypothesis. While much of the kindness literature emphasizes the benefits experienced by recipients, participants in this study frequently described the act of giving itself as meaningful. Of the fifteen participants who reported undertaking an act of kindness, the large majority described some form of reflection, learning, attention, or increased connection to their teammates.

Three-quarters of those undertaking acts explicitly described the process of selecting an act as requiring them to think carefully about another person, for instance. These participants reported researching hobbies and interests, recalling previous conversations, considering personal values, exploring social media profiles, and reflecting on what would be most meaningful to their teammate. The act of kindness therefore frequently became an exercise in attention and perspective-taking.

Several participants described deliberately seeking to understand their teammate more deeply. One participant researched a teammate's social media posts, public speaking engagements, and personal experiences before sending an encouraging message. Another created a card incorporating Pakistani architecture and writing in Urdu after remembering a teammate's interest in learning about her culture. Others drew upon hobbies, family histories, musical interests, cycling, hunting, or shared experiences when selecting their acts.

For many participants, the process itself became meaningful. One participant reflected that receiving a personalized act had inspired her *"to dig deeper ... to be sure I am offering acts that are meaningful, intentional and thoughtful."* Another participant explained that writing a poem required reflecting carefully on a teammate's personality and relationships. Others described the process of creating artwork, compiling music lists, researching family histories, or writing encouraging messages. Several participants also emphasized that the exercise increased their awareness of their teammates. One participant noted difficulty selecting an appropriate act precisely because she did not yet know her teammate well enough, suggesting that the exercise highlighted the importance of understanding others. Another participant explained that the experience had encouraged him to pay greater attention to colleagues and their interests.

Importantly, the evidence suggests that giving was not experienced simply as completing an assignment. Participants frequently described the process as one of reflection, attention, and connection. The acts required them to consider another person's circumstances, interests, challenges, or values and to identify ways of expressing recognition and support.

The evidence therefore indicates that kindness affected not only recipients but also those undertaking the acts. Giving frequently generated reflection, perspective-taking, attention, and deeper awareness of teammates. These findings provide strong support for the second hypothesis and suggest that kindness may strengthen relationships partly by changing how individuals perceive and attend to those around them.

H3: Personalized acts of kindness generate stronger effects

The evidence provides particularly strong support for the third hypothesis. The emotional effects of kindness appear to depend not simply on the act itself but on the extent to which the act demonstrates attention, memory, and understanding of the recipient.

To examine this relationship, acts were coded according to their degree of personalization and responses were coded according to the apparent strength of their emotional effects:

- Personalization was assessed by examining the extent to which an act relied upon prior knowledge of the recipient. Low-personalization acts involved general encouragement or support that could reasonably have been offered to almost any teammate. Moderately personalized acts responded to known circumstances or recent experiences. Highly personalized acts required substantial effort to understand or recognize and appreciate the recipient's interests, experiences, relationships, values, or identity.
- The impact of the acts was assessed through participants' written reflections. Responses were coded according to the language participants used to describe their experiences. Low-intensity responses involved simple appreciation or acknowledgment. Moderate responses included gratitude, encouragement, or descriptions of acts as meaningful or uplifting. High-intensity responses involved words such as *special*, *heard*, *understood*, *touching*, or statements indicating stronger feelings of connection, recognition, and belonging.

Of the fifteen completed acts, seven were classified as highly personalized, five as moderately personalized, and three as relatively generic expressions of encouragement or support. Five of the seven highly personalized acts generated high-intensity responses. None of the low-personalization acts did so.

One particularly strong example involved a participant who deliberately investigated a teammate's public social media activity to learn more about her. The participant discovered posts documenting a substantial health journey, references to religious beliefs, and videos of the teammate speaking publicly on sensitive issues before a government body. He then contacted his teammate to applaud her courage and life choices. Noting her teammates attention to her life, the recipient subsequently reflected that, "He noticed that I had recently posted about being on a health journey and ... picked up on the Bible verse in my Facebook photo and watched a video I had of me speaking to my school board." She continued that "It felt great to hear from him and to see that we have a lot of the same morals and values."

A second example involved a distant family connection discovered through marriage. The giver shared a family crest after researching its history and motto, *distantia-jungit* ("to join things that

were apart"), and connected its meaning to the team's collaborative work. The recipient described the act of kindness as "really touching" and noted that the team member's thoughtfulness created a "connection" that "has deep meaning for me." A third example drew upon a shared experience during the in-person workshop. One participant created an electronic card based on an inside joke that had emerged during the training. The recipient later wrote: "He turned it into a meme which made it feel very personal and meaningful."

These examples illustrate different forms of personalization. Some acts required investigation and research, others drew upon family history or personal identity, while others relied upon shared experiences and collective memory. In each case, the act communicated attention and understanding. Importantly, personalization also appears to affect those undertaking the acts. Several participants described the process of selecting a meaningful act as requiring them to learn more about their teammates and to think more carefully about their interests and experiences, noting how this connected them more to their teammate.

The participant who learned of his teammate's health journey after reading social media posts described her as a "heroine". Another participant explained that he had never previously met his teammate and therefore sought information from another colleague to learn more about him. After discovering his interests in both 1980s metal music and Excel spreadsheets, he created a spreadsheet of popular metal songs that the recipient could sort and organize. The act required the giver to investigate the teammate's interests, reflect upon them, and combine multiple aspects of the recipient's identity into a meaningful gesture. The giver noted how this act helped him connect with his colleague.

Another participant explicitly connected the quality of the act to the quality of her understanding of the recipient, writing, "I need to get to know her better so I can offer a more helpful/meaningful act of kindness." This observation is particularly important because it comes directly from a participant. Her perceived limitation was not insufficient generosity, effort, or resources, but insufficient knowledge of the other person—implying that the exercise prompted an awareness of such knowledge and the need to access such knowledge.

These examples suggest that personalization itself may be a form of relational work. Meaningful acts require participants to observe, remember, investigate, and understand their teammates. In this way, personalization appears to strengthen relationships not only because recipients feel

recognized, but because givers invest greater attention in understanding the people with whom they work. The evidence therefore suggests that different forms of kindness communicate different messages. Generic acts can communicate that “I support you” and even “I care about you” but more personalized acts communicate “I noticed you”, “I remembered what matters to you”, and “I understand something important about who you are.” The strongest emotional responses in the study consistently followed acts that demonstrated such recognition. Personalized acts therefore appear particularly effective because they communicate not simply goodwill, but attention, memory, and understanding.

H4: Acts of kindness strengthen psychological safety

The evidence provides moderate but important support for the fourth hypothesis. Following Edmondson (1999), we identified evidence of psychological safety whenever individuals expressed comfort in acknowledging difficulties and vulnerabilities, admitting limitations and competing demands, expecting supportive responses instead of judgment (especially when performing below what may be expected), and seeking help without fear of criticism. Table 1 shows how many of the 18 participants linked acts of kindness to such feelings. Some participants referenced multiple dimensions. Two thirds of participants referenced at least one.

Table 1. Evidence Relevant to Psychological Safety

Edmondson dimension	Evidence from reflections	Participants
Willingness to reveal difficulties	Health, work, family, and travel challenges	9
Admitting limitations or uncertainty	Difficulty identifying meaningful acts or knowing how to help	7
Discussing competing demands	Work overload, missed meetings, competing responsibilities	7
Expectation of supportive responses	Grace, understanding, empathy, accommodation	6
Seeking or offering help	Direct requests for help and offers of assistance	4

The first indicator concerns willingness to reveal difficulties. Several participants openly discussed circumstances that might otherwise remain private in professional settings, including health challenges, family responsibilities, travel demands, and competing commitments. As already referenced, for instance, one participant described how a teammate had learned about a significant—but private—health journey and reflected: “It felt great to hear from him and to see that we have a lot of the same morals and values.” The willingness to discuss these experiences—from both the giver of the act of kindness and recipient—suggests that participants

felt comfortable sharing personal experiences and circumstances with their teammates (with the act of kindness helping to foster the opportunity for this comfort).

The second indicator concerns admitting limitations or uncertainty. In this respect, one participant openly acknowledged, “I need to get to know her better so I can offer a more helpful/meaningful act of kindness.” Another participant described how a teammate “was a little stumped as to what to do for me, so she flat out asked what she could do for me.” Such comments suggest that, rather than concealing uncertainty, participants appeared willing to admit limitations in their understanding of teammates and to ask directly for guidance. The act of kindness revealed this willingness and allowed for the expression of psychological safety.

The third indicator concerns discussing competing demands and difficulties. Regarding such, participants frequently referred to work pressures, travel obligations, family responsibilities, and competing commitments. One participant, for instance, explained that a teammate “was so overwhelmed that she couldn't identify what I could do to help.” The willingness to acknowledge being overwhelmed and unable to complete the assignment represents a form of interpersonal risk, particularly within a team setting. The act of kindness revealed this, potentially contributing to an expansion in the space for psychological safety.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the acts of kindness contributing to psychological safety concerns comments participants made about expectations of supportive responses. These were especially evident in respect of participants who underperformed relative to expectations. Three participants either did not complete the exercise on time or experienced substantial delays because of competing responsibilities, work pressures, travel, or personal circumstances. Importantly, these situations rarely generated criticism or frustration. Instead, participants frequently responded with understanding and accommodation. One participant reflected that, “We shared our acts of kindness and gave some grace to those who got caught up in work and life.” Another explained: “I'm not bothered as I know the person who was assigned to me is clearly overwhelmed.”

These examples are particularly important because they involve situations in which participants failed to meet expectations. Psychological safety concerns precisely these situations—whether individuals expect blame or support when difficulties arise. In this study, participants generally expected understanding rather than criticism.

Finally, several reflections provide evidence of seeking or offering help through the act of kindness, another contributor to psychological safety. One participant who was travelling and missing meetings received repeated calls and emails from a teammate checking on their well-being and asking whether assistance was needed. The recipient later reflected, “She even asked me again yesterday how I’m doing and if she can help.” These interactions suggest that requests for help and offers of assistance were viewed as legitimate and acceptable within the team.

In considering all these comments, it is apparent that the act of kindness exercise created opportunities for participants to reveal difficulties, admit uncertainty, acknowledge competing demands, and seek support. Participants who were overwhelmed, uncertain, or unable to complete the exercise exposed themselves to potential criticism or judgment. Instead, they generally encountered understanding, empathy, and accommodation. Such evidence suggests that acts of kindness may contribute to psychological safety by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with vulnerability, uncertainty, and difficulty. While the study cannot demonstrate that psychological safety increased as a measurable team characteristic, participants frequently appeared willing to discuss challenges, acknowledge limitations, and reveal competing demands because they expected supportive rather than punitive responses. These findings therefore provide moderate but meaningful support for the fourth hypothesis.

H5: Acts of kindness contribute to supportive relationships, stronger relational ties

The analysis also provides moderate but important support for the fifth hypothesis. Whereas psychological safety concerns whether individuals feel able to acknowledge difficulties or reveal vulnerabilities, the literature on high-quality connections emphasizes the development of supportive and strengthening relationships within organizations (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). High-quality connections are characterized by mutual regard, affirmation, responsiveness, and positive emotional connection. Such interactions strengthen relational ties, increase belonging, and contribute to supportive organizational environments—where team members feel the space to create and the relational cohesion needed for creative and risk-taking activity.

The analysis examined whether acts of kindness contributed to such ties, strengthening relationships, reinforcing mutual regard, encouraging supportive behavior, and contributing to broader expectations regarding how team members should relate to one another. Table 2 shows

the number of comments that related to these relational attributes. Eleven of the 18 participants made at least one such comment, with multiple participants referencing more than one dimension.

Table 2. Evidence of Supportive Relationships and Strengthened Relational Ties

High-quality relationship dimension	Evidence from reflections	Participants
Recognition and affirmation	Recognition of effort and contributions	7
Strengthening relational ties	Reflection on relationships and interactions	5
Encouragement and affirmation	Encouragement, positive messages, uplifting acts	5
Mutual support and community	Support, helping one another, community	4
Reciprocity and relational investment	Intentions to offer more thoughtful acts	4
Collective identity	Shared goals, togetherness, "we" language	4

The first dimension of high-quality relationships concerns recognition and affirmation. Several participants deliberately used the exercise to acknowledge contributions that might otherwise go unnoticed. One participant wrote to a teammate's employer to explain how valuable the teammate's contributions had been and to thank the organization for supporting participation in the program. The participant explained that "Providing positive feedback to one's employer is extremely valuable." The act sought not merely to recognize the individual but to affirm the value of their contributions and reinforce organizational support for their participation.

The second dimension concerns strengthening relational ties. In referring to such, one participant reflected on writing a poem for a teammate and noted: "Writing the poem also gave me a chance to reflect on our interactions, making the act even more meaningful and sincere." The importance of this observation lies in the reflective process itself. The act encouraged the participant to think more deeply about the relationship, suggesting that kindness may strengthen ties not only through the recipient's experience but also through the giver's attention and reflection.

A third dimension emphasizes the importance of encouragement and affirmation in relationships. This was advanced through several acts of kindness. One participant, for instance, shared a personal motto that they attempted to live by, explaining that "There are times when you just need a little hand up." A recipient described receiving a hand-delivered half-birthday card filled with confetti as, "very uplifting." Similarly, another participant explained, "I always appreciate getting an email that does not require action but is simply saying something nice." The recipient of this message reflected, "It was nice to get something in the mail that was not the typical piece

of junk or solicitation. I appreciated it very much.” These examples suggest that relatively small acts of encouragement may strengthen relationships through affirmation and positive regard.

A fourth dimension of high-quality connections and relationships centers on the impact of mutual support and community. Referring to the way acts of kindness cultivated this, one participant explained: “I did meet with [two teammates] yesterday in an attempt to touch base and support each other.” The participant continued that, “It was so nice to have team members who were there for support, help and just to remember that we are in this together.” Similarly, another participant shared a video intended as a pep talk as her act of kindness, explaining that, “I feel like we can all use a little encouragement as we are all juggling so many things in our personal and professional lives.” These comments suggest that intentional acts of kindness may help sustain supportive relationships during challenging work.

The fifth dimension concerns reciprocity and relational investment, which are key to strong relationships and seem to be fostered by acts of kindness. We saw this in that several participants described the act of receiving kindness as motivating them to invest more effort in understanding and supporting others. One participant explained that receiving a thoughtful act had inspired them to offer acts that were “meaningful, intentional and thoughtful.” Another spoke about being inspired to “pay it forward.”

Finally, participants frequently employed collective language about relational connection and support when discussing their teams. One participant reflected, “It is evident that we want to make progress together and need that support and community.” Another wrote, “We are in this together.” These statements suggest that acts of kindness may contribute not only to individual relationships but also to broader feelings of collective identity and shared purpose.

Taken together, these findings are consistent with Dutton and Heaphy's (2003) argument that relatively small relational moments can strengthen connections and improve the quality of relationships within organizations. Acts of kindness that promote encouragement, recognition, affirmation, and support appear to function as relational episodes that strengthen ties between team members and contribute to supportive environments. The evidence does not demonstrate the emergence of stable team norms associated with these attributes. However, participants frequently described stronger relationships, increased appreciation of one another's contributions,

greater mutual support, and a stronger sense of community. These findings therefore provide moderate but meaningful support for the fifth hypothesis.

Conclusion: Kindness as Relational Capability

This paper posed a simple but largely unanswered question: can intentionally facilitated acts of kindness help create the relational conditions that effective teams require, particularly trust, support, and psychological safety? To explore this question, the study examined a field experiment embedded within a three-month problem-driven learning program in which participants worked in teams addressing complex public problems and undertook an exercise in intentional kindness. Participants' reflections on one iteration of this exercise were analyzed as documentary evidence of how such acts of kindness influenced team relationships and interactions. Although exploratory and based on a relatively small sample, the findings suggest that intentionally facilitated kindness does matter. The acts of kindness appeared to affect not only recipients, but also givers, relationships, and broader patterns of interaction within teams.

Three findings appear particularly important. First, the strongest responses occurred when acts were personal, demonstrating attention to team members, memory of interaction, and understanding of self and other. Participants repeatedly emphasized not the material value of the acts, but what they communicated. Second, acts of kindness appeared to create opportunities for participants to discuss difficulties, acknowledge competing demands, and seek assistance, often encountering understanding rather than criticism. Third, repeated acts appeared to strengthen relationships, encourage reciprocity, and reinforce expectations of support and mutual care.

Taken together, these findings suggest that kindness may be understood as a relational capability that is key to collaboration, especially in teams doing problem driven work. Capabilities are the things that individuals, organizations, and groups can do (Andrews et al., 2017; Kattel and Mazucatto, 2026; Maine et al, 2020; Morgan, 2006). They enable agents to convert intentions and resources into effective action. It is accepted that teams depend upon capabilities like communication, coordination, learning, and problem solving. The present study suggests that kindness may represent another such capability.

Effective collaboration in teams requires that team members have the empowered ability to trust each other, ask for help, admit uncertainty, support colleagues, acknowledge difficulties, and respond constructively when others struggle. These activities depend upon relationships. Teams

therefore require the ability to notice one another, understand one another's circumstances, provide encouragement, and respond supportively to vulnerability and difficulty. Kindness cultivates these things and is thus a root capability of effective teamwork and collaboration.

Viewed in this way, kindness is not simply a personal virtue or moral disposition. It is a capability that helps teams establish the relational conditions necessary for collaboration. Acts of kindness appear to strengthen interpersonal ties, reduce interpersonal risk, encourage reciprocity, and foster expectations of support and care. In doing so, they may contribute both to the psychological safety emphasized by Edmondson (1999) and to the high-quality connections described by Dutton and Heaphy (2003).

The study remains exploratory, however. The findings cannot establish causality, demonstrate long-term effects, or determine whether similar patterns would emerge in other settings. Nevertheless, the consistency of the evidence suggests that kindness may represent an important and underexamined contributor to effective teamwork. Future research should examine these relationships in larger samples, across different organizational contexts, and over longer periods of time. Studies might combine kindness interventions with direct measures of psychological safety, trust, collaboration, and team performance. Longitudinal research could examine whether repeated acts of kindness produce durable changes in relationships and team norms. Comparative studies might investigate whether kindness matters particularly in settings characterized by uncertainty, interdependence, and collaborative problem solving.

This study cannot answer these questions definitively. It does, however, point toward a potentially important conclusion. Teams succeed not only because members possess expertise, resources, or formal authority, but because they develop the relational capabilities necessary to work together effectively. Kindness appears to be one such capability. Small acts of attention, recognition, and support may help create the relationships upon which collaboration depends and may ultimately prove to be an important foundation for psychological safety, supportive team environments, and effective collective action.

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