

From the President of RUSA

Kindness as a Practice

Leading with Care in Uncertain Times

Shannon D. Jones

As I sat down to write this column in December 2025, we were emerging from a period marked by chaos, turmoil, uncertainty, and profound stress. We had just come off the longest federal government shutdown in US history. Millions of people faced the threat of losing their SNAP benefits, while many families were bracing for potential reductions to or the loss of Affordable Care Act subsidies that make basic healthcare accessible.

Taken together, these events reflected more than political disagreement. They revealed a troubling disregard for the lived realities of everyday people. They underscored how deeply leaders' decisions can affect people's lives in immediate and lasting ways.

As I reflected in that moment, I found myself thinking not only about what was happening nationally, but also about the care and consideration we show to one another closer to home, within our workplaces, teams, and profession.

I was writing during a season when pausing to give thanks is the norm. For me, Thanksgiving invites reflection on all the things in my life for which I am grateful. At the same time, December is a month of gratitude, generosity, and giving, where we offer gifts and expressions of love and care to the people who matter to us. December 2025 sharpened my focus on one word: kindness—more specifically, how we operationalize kindness in our everyday lives and in our interactions with the people we encounter, our colleagues, our patrons, and ourselves.

I also want to be transparent about what prompted me to lean into this topic so intentionally. Around the time I was drafting this column, I received an email from a colleague. The tone felt unkind. It landed differently than perhaps it was intended, and it stayed with me, not because of its content, but because of how it made me feel. That moment reminded me how powerful our words are, especially in written communication, and how easily tone can cause harm even when harm is not intended. Rather than responding immediately, I chose to sit with that experience and use this column as a way to reflect, to process, and to recommit myself—and invite others to recommit—to kindness in how we show up for one another.

Kindness is the word, and kindness is the focus of this column.

Why Kindness Matters

As individuals, we all want to be treated well. We all want to be treated with respect. We all want to be treated with kindness, whether we are leaders in the profession or front-line library workers.

My mother and grandmother taught me the adage, “do unto others as I would have them do unto me.” I want to be treated with kindness, and that is what I aim for in all my interactions.

Kindness is one of the greatest expressions of respect we can offer one another. It is one of the clearest ways to demonstrate compassion and empathy. It is also one of the strongest markers of civility in the workplace. Kindness is something we should all aim for, model, and practice consistently.

A quote often attributed to the late Dr. Maya Angelou captured this truth with clarity when she said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”¹ In our libraries and daily interactions, how we make people feel often outlasts any policy, procedure, or transaction. Kindness shapes those feelings and, in doing so, shapes trust, belonging, and memory.

Before moving further, it is important to define what I mean by kindness.

Defining Kindness

I was struck by a recent LinkedIn post by Amy Gibson² that clearly articulates the difference between being nice and being kind. Gibson’s post reinforced something many of us intuitively know. Niceness prioritizes comfort, while kindness prioritizes care, growth, and trust, even when conversations are difficult. For me, being nice is often about who you want people to think you are. It can be performative, shaped by a desire to manage impressions or maintain appearances. Kindness, on the other hand, reflects who you are on the inside. It is not driven by motive or performance. It comes naturally, rooted in sincerity, and is offered freely to others because it aligns with your values.

Being nice often means avoiding hard conversations to keep the peace. Being kind means engaging in those conversations with honesty and compassion because avoiding them helps no one. Niceness may soften the truth or remain silent. Kindness delivers feedback clearly and respectfully, with the intent to support growth. Niceness seeks harmony in the moment. Kindness seeks progress over time.

Kindness is not passive. It is not people pleasing. It is not the absence of accountability. Kindness is active, intentional, and principled. It sets boundaries with respect. It holds people accountable with empathy. It shows up consistently, even when it would be easier to step back.

In librarianship, and especially in reference and user services work, this distinction matters. Kindness builds trust. Trust is essential to the work we do in libraries.

Kindness Is a Workplace Practice

Research validates what many of us experience. Studies highlighted by *Harvard Business Review* demonstrate that kindness in the workplace, expressed through recognition, gratitude, and genuine acknowledgment, reduces burnout, strengthens well-being, builds social connection, and contributes to lower turnover and higher productivity.^{3,4}

Swinand⁵ further argues that when anxiety is high and morale is low, kindness is not a luxury. It is a necessity. He emphasizes that kindness at work shows up through everyday practices, including prioritizing self-care, doing your job well so others are not burdened, offering help when colleagues are struggling, recognizing and acknowledging contributions, and delivering honest feedback

with care. He also distinguishes kindness from niceness, noting that niceness can drift toward avoidance, while kindness is rooted in honesty, accountability, and genuine concern for others.

Additional research reinforces the idea that kindness is not simply a personal virtue but a powerful driver of organizational health. Levy⁶ highlights that respectful and kind workplaces are associated with higher energy, increased motivation, greater job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and cultures in which trust and psychological safety can flourish. Kindness is also contagious. Small, everyday acts of care can ripple outward, shaping workplace culture in meaningful and lasting ways.

For those of us in reference and user services, this is especially significant. Our work depends on presence, trust, and human connection. How we show up matters.

Libraries Are Not Immune

It is important to acknowledge that libraries are not immune to workplace behaviors that run counter to kindness. Research in library and information science has documented the prevalence and persistence of bullying, incivility, and dysfunctional workplace dynamics in library environments.^{7,8}

Ettarh⁹ coined the term *vocational awe* to describe the set of ideas, values, and assumptions that librarians hold about themselves and the profession, in which libraries are framed as inherently good, almost sacred institutions beyond critique. When libraries are viewed in this way, the harm that occurs within them is often minimized, dismissed, or rationalized, making it difficult to name, address, and remediate workplace incivility and bullying.

Recent scholarship further highlights how harm, silent resistance, and unaddressed power dynamics allow workplace harm to persist, even in institutions that publicly espouse values such as equity, care, and service.¹⁰ These behaviors can manifest as dismissive communication, public criticism, information gatekeeping, silencing of voices, or patterns of disrespect that erode trust over time. Too often, such conduct is excused under the guise of professionalism, tradition, or personality differences.

Naming these dynamics matters because unaddressed incivility undermines morale, damages psychological safety, and disproportionately impacts those with less positional power. Recognizing that libraries are susceptible to these challenges is not an indictment of our profession. Instead, it is a necessary step toward building workplaces rooted in accountability, respect, and care.

Recognizing harm, however, is only the first step. Awareness without action does little to change lived experience. If we are serious about addressing bullying, dysfunction, and everyday unkindness, then kindness must move beyond aspiration and become practice.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Operationalizing kindness does not require grand gestures. It shows up in the small, consistent choices we make every day. At an information desk or service point, this means approaching patrons with patience, empathy, and respect, especially when they arrive at the encounter feeling frustrated, stressed, or unsure about their information need. With colleagues, it involves listening without interrupting, providing feedback clearly and thoughtfully, and choosing collaboration over competition. In our communication, we need to be mindful of our tone in emails and messages because intent can easily be misinterpreted, and grace is often lacking. In leadership and teamwork, it means setting clear expectations respectfully, holding team members accountable with empathy,

and acknowledging their contributions and efforts. With ourselves, it requires extending grace when our capacity is limited, setting boundaries to protect our well-being, and recognizing that self-kindness is essential for sustaining our ability to care for others.

When kindness is practiced this way, it becomes part of our professional muscle memory. It shapes culture, strengthens trust, and allows us to support one another consistently and humanely.

A Call Forward

As I close this column, I return to December, a season marked by gratitude, reflection, and giving. In a time when we exchange gifts and offer expressions of care and appreciation, I am reminded that one of the most meaningful things we can give one another costs nothing.

Kindness

As we move into 2026, I hope we choose to practice kindness with intention in how we lead, collaborate, serve, and care for ourselves and one another. In a world that too often models indifference and incivility, let us commit to creating library workplaces where people feel seen, respected, and valued.

In all that you do, choose kindness as the default.

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