

A More Empowering Way to Be Nice
By Marilyn Suttle



Is being nice a good thing or a bad thing? It is actually one of the most life-balancing success skills you can develop.

The problem is most people have the wrong definition of the word.

I did. When I was growing up, our culture dictated that girls should

be nice. Which I equated to words like: docile, compliant and secondary. I bought right into that definition without even realizing it.

During my college years, my sister called me on it. She said, 'You're too nice. Stop that!' I didn't understand. She said, 'Marilyn if I picked out two colors and said that red was the best one, you would agree with me.' It's true. I like red. She continued, 'But if I said, blue was the best color, you'd change your mind and tell me I was right. You've got to stop that.'

Wow, she was right. Her words were a wake up call, but it took me another decade to fully embrace them. I had the word 'nice' all wrong. I thought it was nice to put myself last. I thought it was nice to not make waves. It was painful to be nice by that definition, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

I entered into my marriage with this definition of nice. When it was time to clean up after dinner, I asked my darling husband, 'would you like to help me wash the pans?' He'd say, 'No, I don't like to wash pans.' I washed the pans.

Here I was, a successful consultant working at a Fortune 500 company, but I couldn't enroll my husband in helping me wash the pans because I thought it wouldn't be nice. Soon after, I sought out books and trainings that taught me new skills which lead me to new conclusions about being nice.

One day I tested out my new definition of nice. After dinner I said, 'will you wash the pans tonight?' My husband said, 'I don't really want to.' With complete comfort and no animosity, I said, 'I don't want to either. Will you do it?' He said, 'Okay,' and washed the pans. It was that easy. We even made an agreement that the person who cooks doesn't have to clean. I felt like I entered the twilight zone. He was okay with washing the pans. I was assertive and the world didn't end. He didn't spontaneously combust. Nobody died. This is wonderful!

Then, I got angry. I realized that for years I had been the put-upon one, the self-sacrificing one, the one who made life easier for everyone but me, all because of my relationship with the word 'nice'. It was my own doing. That was the burn. It's so much easier to blame

someone else - a domineering boss, an insensitive spouse, a selfish neighbor. It was at that time that I rebelled against being 'nice.'

Still, the word kept showing up. People often said to me, 'you are so nice.' It made me cringe. I remember a woman at my son's school saying, 'you are the nicest person I know.' I hated that. In my mind, that meant I was slipping. I was playing the martyr and not getting my needs met.

I didn't understand the true meaning of the word. I told my closest friends, 'please don't call me nice.' They thought it was hilarious. One friend would correct herself and call me kind. I could tolerate that. Another friend couldn't resist and bought me a T-shirt that said 'Be Nice.'

My clients kept thinking I was nice too. So much so, that they bring me back to their companies every year, even during tough economic times. But I had changed. I was a new kind of nice. Assertive, honest and authentic were never words that fit the old definition. They are very much a part of the true meaning of the word. I notice that businesses that treat their customers and employees nice are not being pushovers. Instead they are growing and attracting the best people.

Then one day my friend Lori and I were sitting at a Starbucks talking about the key to business success. We realized it all came from being the right kind of nice.

The price of not being nice is too high to ignore, especially in our global economy. But knowing how to be nice in a healthy successful way takes skills. It's nice to be nice once you know how to do it. Does a word like 'honesty' fall into your definition of nice? Isn't it nice to tell your co-worker he has spinach in his teeth at the beginning of the meeting instead of finding out for himself after the meeting? Isn't it nice that people can trust that you'll tell them the truth, even if it isn't always easy to hear the truth? Start noticing how you feel when you are being nice. If you're feeling resentful, suppressed or unhappy, it might be time to explore your definition of nice.

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