

MONDAY MANNA

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ARE WE ALL GUILTY OF NOT TELLING THE TRUTH AT WORK?

By Robert J Tamasy

When the workplace will return to normal – or if it ever will – is impossible to tell. As pandemic restrictions were put into place, many people found themselves working from home. That is, if they were working at all. Some found the “home-based marketplace” an appealing change: spending more time with family.

One casualty of this “new normal,” however, has been a decline in direct, person-to-person interactions. Technological innovations like Zoom, Skype, FaceTime and others have helped fill the gap, but there is no substitute for spontaneous face-to-face, eye-to-eye communication – stopping by a colleague’s workspace to compare notes on a project, or simply to exchange pleasantries.

Sometimes that involves only encountering someone and saying “Hi! How are you?”, exchanging smiles and continuing to wherever we are heading. That is a customary, cordial exchange, but too often it is superficial, not intended to trade any real information. Maybe that is why the late writer and activist Maya Angelou wrote, “When people ask, ‘How are you?’ have the nerve sometimes to answer truthfully.”

Think about it: When people say, “Hello, how are you?” how often do you make the effort to answer them, explaining honestly how you are? Or reversing roles, how would you react if someone began to tell you about their struggles or pain or frustrations?

We might offer the excuse, “Well, I’m just being polite. I’m saying hello, but don’t really want to know how someone is doing.” I have been guilty of that myself, remembering vividly a time when I was attending a conference. Encountering a friend I had not seen in a long time, I said, “Hi, (Pete)! How are you?” but was stunned when “Pete” began to respond to my question. Then there have been times when people have said the same to me, but their body language told me they did not really want to know how I was.

A song I have heard many times addresses this. As the vocalist observes, “Truth be told, the truth is rarely told.” We put on smiles that mask sadness or fear or pain we might be dealing with. We respond, “I’m doing fine” – even when we’re not. Granted, we cannot always take the time to listen to someone’s problems or share our own, but shouldn’t we do more to recognise the human side of work – beyond the deadlines, goals, and bottom-line considerations?

This is a recurring theme in the Scriptures, underscoring the importance of offering compassion to one another in this daily struggle we call everyday life. For instance, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” Perhaps one reason for the adversities we confront is so we can empathize with others facing similar challenges.

Another passage offers this exhortation: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

When – and if – we resume the familiar office work routines, maybe we should try a bit harder to respond truthfully when someone asks, or if we ask them, “How are you?”

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

How have pandemic restrictions affected your usual work routine? Have you missed being able to interact directly, in person, with co-workers and colleagues? What has that been like for you?

When you see someone and they say, "Hello, how are you?", how do you typically respond? Do you casually say that to others, simply as a polite greeting rather than a sincere question?

Why do you think it is so difficult for many of us to be genuine and open in communicating with others how we are truly doing in our lives and work, rather than flippantly responding that we are doing well – especially when we aren't?

What steps can we take – should we take – to be more attentive and encouraging to others at our workplaces, especially when we have more opportunities to interact face to face rather than over a computer or smartphone screen? How can we maintain a right balance between our job responsibilities and being supportive to those with whom we work?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:

Matthew 5:1-9

1 Corinthians 15:58

2 Corinthians 1:5-11

Galatians 6:9-10

Philippians 1:3-8