



## Lessons on making nice in the arts

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**MADELEINE DORE**

Now is the time to be nice in the arts. We find out how.



*A new un-conference reminds us to make nice. Image: cc*

We're a pretty nice bunch in the arts. A scroll through Twitter reveals dozens of congratulatory messages for colleagues, and a [Federal funding crisis](http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/grants-and-funding/deborah-stone/62-arts-organisations-lose-funding-from-australia-council-251271) (<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/grants-and-funding/deborah-stone/62-arts-organisations-lose-funding-from-australia-council-251271>) is only bringing us closer together as we stand up for what we value.

But while we may have learned how to celebrate people's successes and stand together in a storm, are we still learning how to make nice on a day-to-day level?

Recently, cultural manager Ann Tonks wrote about bullying in the arts sector, observing that 'artists get away with bad behaviour more than anyone else.'

She also points to how under resourcing of arts organisations creates a pressure to be more efficient and effective, leading to an environment where bullying may be more likely.

**Read: Bullying in the arts is a real problem**

**(<http://www.artshub.com.au/education/news-article/career-advice/professional-development/ann-tonks/bullying-in-the-arts-is-a-real-problem-251325>)**

But there is value in simply being nice. Research by Peter Shankman, author of *Nice Companies Finish First* (<http://www.amazon.com/Nice-Companies-Finish-First-Over/dp/0230341896>) found that 'nice organisations' are 30 to 40 percent more successful than 'not nice' companies.

We can see that on an individual level too. People leaves bad bosses, not bad jobs (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2015/08/04/people-leave-managers-not-companies/>), and often it's not how great someone is at their job, but how great they are to work with.

The founders of a new un-conference held as part of Vivid Ideas Make Nice (<http://www.make-nice.com.au/#/about/>) are aiming to start a revolution of nice. Top of their list is to start a conversation around what it means to create better working environments and interactions within the creative industries.

There are good reasons being nice, too: failing to could have devastating impact and ultimately lead to a cultural brain drain.

'If a place is quite unenjoyable to work in, or if they push people too hard, people start to leave for overseas or they create their own business,' said Make Nice director and founder Ngaio Parr.

There are endless opportunities to improve when it comes to making connections and building community in the creative industries and being nice plays a big part.

'It is kind of saying let's just make nice and have fun and support each other and learn from each other, but also poke our tongue at the traditional idea of making nice,' she said.

Creating a nice environment in the arts goes beyond the adage 'if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all', to reworking approaches in leadership, role-modelling and work environments. 'I think it is just a slow, slow, slow trickle down process,' said Parr.

Here are some simple approaches to being kinder in our organisation and sector.

### **LESSON 1: NICE AS AN EXPECTATION FOR ALL**

The term 'make nice' is often associated as being a double standard put on women and young girls. But being nice shouldn't be an expectation put solely on women as if it's our duty to appease and be likeable. We all need to work at making our organisations healthy and productive places in which to operate.

Sometimes this requires being nice to ourselves first and ensuring we take steps towards self-care.

**Read: [50 ways to take care of yourself in the arts](http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/performing-arts/madeleine-dore/50-ways-to-take-care-of-yourself-in-the-arts-249726)**

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### **LESSON 2: A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS**

When a colleague gets a promotion, a new job, or their project takes off, envy can rear its ugly head. But someone else's success can actually be good for your own career and art.

'The idea of a rising tide lifts all boat is really not taught to you at university in Australia and in a lot of workplaces it can be very competitive,' said Parr.

Celebrate success knowing you'll be taken along for the ride, too.

### **LESSON 3: IT TAKES ZERO TIME TO BE NICE**

Busy schedules, budget stress and pending deadlines can contribute to stress and result in our usual friendly and collaborative approaches being lost. But remember it takes little time to treat colleagues with respect. 'It is really quite fun to be helpful and it takes zero time to be nice to other women or other people in the creative industries,' said Parr.

'If someone asks you to have a coffee or if they would like to meet just say yes, go and have a coffee with them, it takes 15 minutes. Or if someone emails you and asks your opinion and tells you they idolise you, respond to that.'

If you're an arts manager, 'remind yourself to be supportive of people, talk nicely to your staff and encourage them,' added Parr.

### **LESSON 4: FORGET COMPETITION**

We can fall into the habit of guarding our knowledge and expertise because of fear of competition. We're conditioned to believe there is only one position, only so many ideas, and a scarcity of opportunities. But much like the rising tide analogy, sharing information can boost all.

'Just being open with those kind of things [is valuable],' said Parr. 'Especially in the creative industries where we all have such different talents, different aesthetics.'

'If you are nice to people and happy to talk to people and help people out – we have all been in that situation before where we needed that information or advice – then it is a just a nice cycle to create.'

### **LESSON 5: SAYING NO IS ALSO NICE**

Being nice should not be confused to being a doormat. Valuing your time and saying no is an important way to enforce boundaries and take care of yourself.

It is not possible to do everything all the time, and agreeing to do something when your head and heart aren't in it can be detrimental to you and your collaborator.

'If you are doing what is best for yourself then it is always being nice. Whether that means saying no to someone, as long as it is in a polite way and actually letting them know the situation, I feel like that is still the best situation that can come out of something,' said Parr.

### **LESSON 6: PAY GENUINE COMPLIMENTS AND REACH OUT**

Being nice is often associated with being phony at networking events, which nobody likes. But meeting people in the creative industries doesn't need to have that icky feeling. As part of Make Nice, there will be a workshop on Not Gross Networking (<http://www.make-nice.com.au/#/about/>) for those who dislike the traditional form.

'Being stuck in a room with 100 strangers and getting pushed together in an attempt to network is just my idea of hell,' said Parr, who recommends putting yourself out there in the way that suits you.

'It just means you are coming from a really nice, honest place and telling them why you'd like to talk to them or meet them without being like, "Here is my business card, this is what you can get out of me and this is what I want out of you".'

Parr has made most of her contacts through sending nice emails. 'Nine times out of ten they will write back to you even though you think they are so much more important or couldn't possibly have the time to respond to you.'

Shankman also [recommends \(http://www.inc.com/one-thing-new/why-nice-is-the-new-black.html\)](http://www.inc.com/one-thing-new/why-nice-is-the-new-black.html) connecting better on social media: Go home and go onto Facebook and find five or six people that you have not talked to in six months and either start a conversation on their wall or unfriend them.”

## **LESSON 7: EMBRACE THE COMMUNITY**

To avoid cultural brain drain, it's important we appreciate and support the vast creative talent within Australia. That can start within your own personal mindset, explained Parr.

'If you decide to kind of embrace the Australian community it can make such a difference to your career.'

Make Nice is one approach to creating that kind of community, especially among creative women. 'I just didn't see it and I wanted it so I did something about it,' Parr said.

***[Make Nice: An Un-Conference for Creative Women](http://www.make-nice.com.au/)*** (<http://www.make-nice.com.au/>) ***will be held in Sydney from 2-4 June***

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Madeleine Dore is ArtsHub's Deputy Editor and is fascinated by the intersection of art and entrepreneurship, and is dedicated to communities that encourage creative and artistic careers.

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