



The transformational power of gracious leadership

A conversation with Janet Smith Meeks

Co-chaired by KeyBank's Holly Stokes and Michelle Haslinger, our Central Ohio Key4Women community recently hosted a networking event that featured a fireside chat between KeyBank Central Ohio Market President Melissa Ingwersen and Janet Smith Meeks. The conversation centered on Janet's recently published book *Gracious Leadership: Lead Like You've Never Led Before* and her movement to create a world full of respectful leaders who guide their teams to excellence.

More than 100 local business leaders heard this inspiring woman describe how to be tough but kind, straightforward but compassionate, and driven and grateful as a fully respectful leader.

The following is a summary of Janet's message that day.

A better way to lead

There's no mistaking it: We live in a time when civility and decency have been devalued, creating a true crisis in leadership. For many executives, kind and respectful treatment of employees doesn't factor into their management model. After all, they reason, it's best to remain distant and detached from the people around you.

Janet Meeks knows there's a better way. It's called gracious leadership.

Key takeaways



More than 100 business leaders attended this Key4Women networking event based on the book *Gracious Leadership: Lead Like You've Never Led Before*.



We live in a time where civility and decency have been devalued, and it has created a true crisis in leadership.



The book is part of a movement to create a world full of respectful leaders who guide their teams to excellence.

Leadership based on civility and respect

An award-winning C-suite leader with a record of achievement in the healthcare and financial services industries, Janet has drawn important conclusions about the values that are essential for effective leadership. “Gracious leadership is about the power of respectful, positive leadership,” said Janet. “Gracious executives and managers listen with purpose, recognize they don’t have all the answers and demonstrate uncompromising respect for everyone. They unfailingly give credit for successes to the team. And here’s the bottom line: Teams led by gracious leaders can and do achieve peak performance.”

To some, the word “gracious” may sound soft. “Nothing could be further from the truth,” countered Janet. “To be gracious is above all to be respectful of others. Gracious leaders provide constructive feedback—delivered with kind candor—to encourage employees to excel. Employees are starving for feedback because they want to understand the impact of their work and to know that they’re making a difference.”

Compassionate accountability

Janet has employed the key ingredients of *Gracious Leadership* throughout her career, and she’s now spearheading a movement to help foster leaders who put respect and civility at the center of the workplace. She has the proof to back up her beliefs: Janet has consistently led highly engaged teams to generate sustained value, superior profitability and customer satisfaction by facilitating a culture of compassionate accountability.

“Gracious leaders believe that compassion and accountability go hand-in-hand,” Janet noted. “Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, and effective leaders uniformly place a high value on developing healthy, positive relationships. At the same time, employees need to know in unambiguous terms what is expected of them and how their performance is being measured. You aren’t being respectful to them if your expectations and standards are unclear. Leaders must be accountable too—they have to own their results, and their team members must see that.”



Gracious leaders are compassionate, but that doesn’t mean they let poor performers drag others down. “A gracious leader always works with individuals to help them be better,” she said. “But it’s tough love. If employees don’t improve or refuse to be accountable, they have to go. Failing to address problem employees is a sign of disrespect for team members who are performing.”



KeyBank Central Ohio Market President Melissa Ingwersen, author Janet Smith Meeks and Key4Women Co-chair Holly Stokes at the fireside chat networking event.



Janet Smith Meeks leads a group of over 100 local business leaders in a fireside chat based on her book *Gracious Leadership: Lead Like You’ve Never Led Before*.



Participants were able to get first-hand insights from Meeks during her book signing.

Janet emphasized that compassion plays an important role in the lives of individual team members as well as leaders. “In the hospital, I saw numerous instances of small acts of kindness—a caring word, a gentle touch—by nurses and physicians who were helping people deal with suffering,” she observed. “They had the head-heart connection. They were doing the technical parts of their jobs and also taking care of the whole patient’s needs.”

Basketball and mentors

“When I was in the eighth grade, my father encouraged me to go out for basketball,” Janet reflected. “While I couldn’t walk and dribble at the same time, I was willing to give it a try. Not only did I fall in love with the sport, but some of my most important lessons about leadership and teamwork originated from this experience. Like any team, our squad had to stick to the coach’s discipline to gain mastery of basic skills. We had to adopt the coach’s game plan and expertly execute plays necessary to win, just as teams in the workplace must follow the leader’s game plan to accomplish their goals and realize the organizational mission.”

Like great coaches, great leaders provide constructive feedback when things don’t go well and praise when excellent results are achieved. “It’s really disturbing that some leaders think that praise is soft,” she added. “Recognition isn’t soft at all. In fact, it’s absolutely strategic. The value of telling someone they’ve done a great job is immeasurable.”

Janet was quick to underscore the value of mentoring in the workplace. “After 40 years of professional service, I’m convinced that mentors who shepherd subordinates along in their careers have the greatest impact on their development,” she said. “I’d like to see purposeful mentoring programs in all organizations, and I advise aspiring leaders to have the courage to seek out mentors who will give them their very best.”

The support you need

To learn more about the gracious leadership movement and to obtain a copy of Janet’s book, visit graciousleadershipbook.com.

For more Key4Women resources to help you reach your goals, visit key.com/women.

Was this recap helpful? Would you like to weigh in on future topics? Take our [survey](#).

Gracious Leadership—the book and the movement

Janet’s dream is that we fill our world with leaders who inspire their teams to excel, to shine brightly as positive leaders, and to be the role models of today that the generations of tomorrow will want to pattern their lives after. In the book, Janet describes the 13 key ingredients of gracious leadership that are proven must-have strategies to optimize organizational results.

“All of the key ingredients are required,” said Janet. “It’s like baking a cake—you can’t leave one ingredient out and expect that it will turn out well. There are no shortcuts when leaders seek to develop and to sustain highly engaged, enthusiastic teams that produce consistently excellent results for their organizations.”

Gracious Leadership is more than just a book—it’s a movement to inspire a high-performance leadership culture based on inclusiveness, respect and openness.



Melissa Haslinger, Key4Women Co-chair; Suzan Jones, Sr. Cash Management Advisor; Holly Stokes, Key4Women Co-chair; Colleen Dugarte, Key4Women; and Jamie Warder, Head of Business Banking, attend the event.



The transformational power of
gracious leadership

3 of 3