

Arrested for hugging

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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.



Every Valentine's Day, I always remember a bizarre story that caught my eye in the news a few years back. Police in Nanjing, China arrested eleven people on the street – for hugging. It seems that these individuals had decided that it would be a good idea to put up some signs and offer a free hug to anybody that wanted one.

Now, I must admit that for me, as a bewildered 63-year old male trying to make sense of a world filled with stress, anger and hate, going around and hugging other people sounds like a brilliant idea. I know it sounds very 'Hippy Sixties', but I can tell you that it's a great alternative to what I see going on in the world today, especially in the world of

customers and employees. Wherever I go today I encounter alienation, apathy, unfriendliness, coldness and even hostility that fills me with despair. If ever I was to be arrested, I would love it to be for hugging.

Yes I know it's Covid-19 and we have to practice social distancing, but even a friendly face would be great right now. Why is it that the world

has become such a cruel place? Is it fear? Is it uninspired leaders that have betrayed us? Is it because the attitude of: 'Every man for himself' has permeated the world? That's what the pundits and experts have us believe. It seems that we are so scared of the horrible world that we have become increasingly more isolated from one another.

It seems that we are so scared of the horrible world that we have become increasingly more isolated from one another. Some say that we fear making ourselves vulnerable to rejection.

Or perhaps we feel it is somehow beneath us to love and to seek love from others. Or maybe it is because most of our leaders – political, business, religious, sports, and others – are poor examples of caring for others. Maybe as members of the human race we are just following our basic instincts to survive.

I truly believe that we need to challenge the apathy and indifference, and to replace it with more hugging – or even air-hugging for now.

Yes, there is ugliness and pain in the world, but equally so there is also beauty and wonder and joy. The world is not such a terrible place, after all, and the only hope that we have as a human race is to love each other, rather than hate, to reach out and serve, rather than be indifferent.

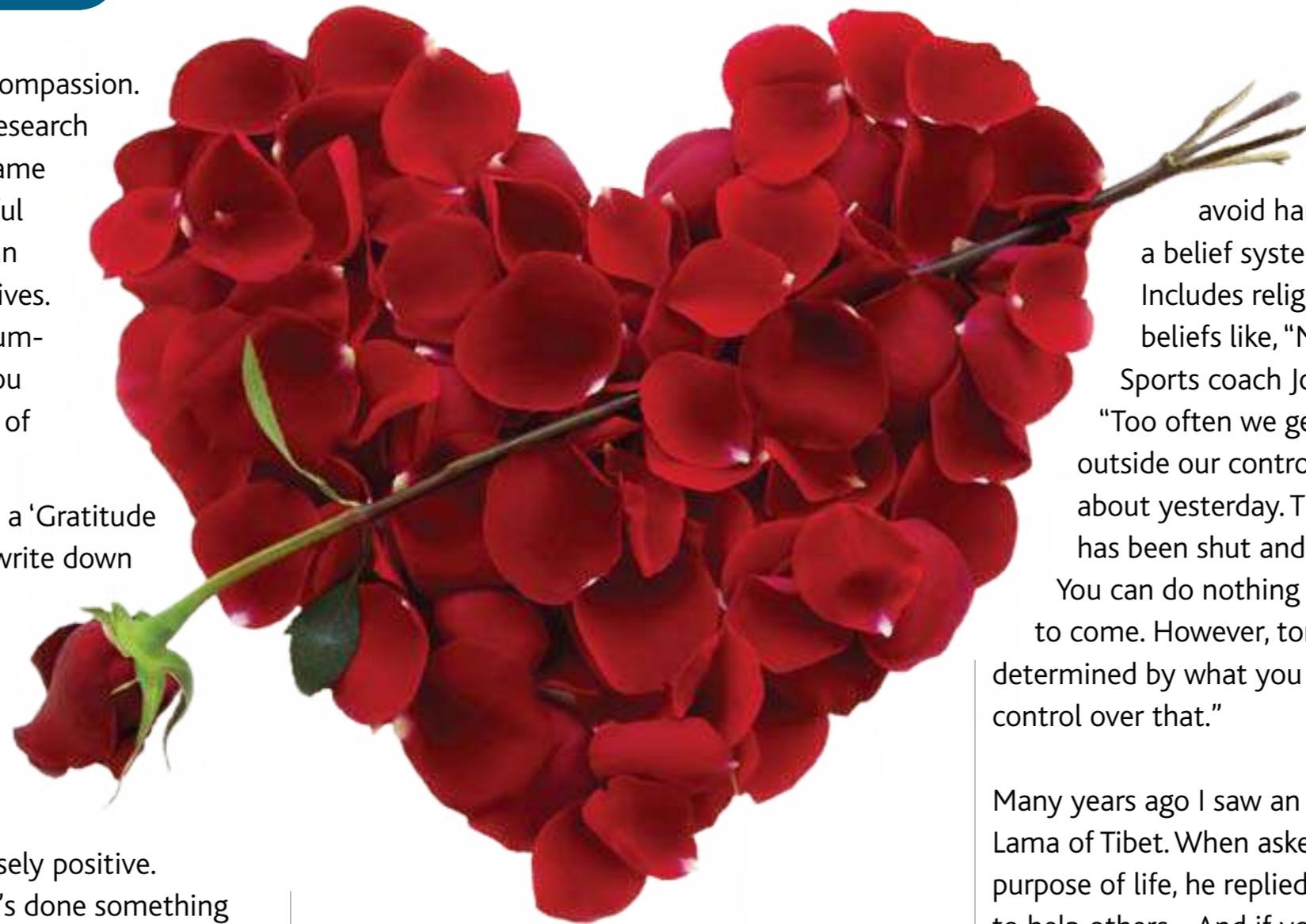
Hugs release endorphins which are essential to our sense of well-being. But they also make us feel



more human and encourage compassion.

A lot of recently published research on the science of happiness came to a number of really wonderful conclusions about what we can do to become happier in our lives. An article in Time magazine summarised this exquisitely. Do you want to be happier? Try some of the following:

- **Count your blessings:** Start a 'Gratitude Journal' in which you weekly write down three to five things for which you are grateful, from the mundane, to the magnificent.
- **Practice random and systematic acts of kindness:** To both friends and strangers. The consequences are immensely positive. Pay it forward when someone's done something nice for you.
- **Savour life's little joys:** Play close attention to momentary pleasures and wonders. Look back at you 'mental photographs' of happier times, but there's more than enough beauty and kindness in the world to love life. (Don't expect the news to publish this.)
- **Thank a mentor:** If there's someone that you owe a debt of gratitude for their guidance – no matter how many years ago they were there for you – don't wait to express your appreciation, in person if possible.



- **Learn to forgive, and to let go of anger and resentment:** Write a letter of forgiveness, even if you never post it, and get back your peace of mind. The burden is just too great to carry.
- **Invest time and energy in friends and family:** Strong personal relationships are more important than where you live, how much you earn, your job, and even your health.
- **Take care of your body:** Get plenty of rest, exercise, stretching, smiling and laughing, and practice these daily.

- **Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships:** You can't

avoid hard times, but you can have a belief system that helps you to cope. Includes religious faith, but also secular beliefs like, "Nothing lasts forever."

Sports coach John Wooden wrote:

"Too often we get distracted by what is outside our control. You can't do anything about yesterday. The door to the past has been shut and the key thrown away.

You can do nothing about tomorrow. It is yet to come. However, tomorrow is in large part determined by what you do today. You have control over that."

Many years ago I saw an interview with the Dalai Lama of Tibet. When asked about what is the purpose of life, he replied: "The purpose of life is to help others... And if you can't help them, would you at least not hurt them?"

Azar Jamine, CEO of Econometrix, expressed it similarly: "Business needs to wake up to the fact that just making money is an empty goal without contributing to the betterment of life of your fellow human beings." I couldn't agree more: In the world of business, every day we are given a magical and poignant opportunity – no, a privilege – to make a difference for our colleagues and our customers.

Hugging is a very important part of my life, and I feel very sorry for people who are unable

to experience it regularly. I remember once bumping into my brother at a shopping centre somewhere, and, in our usual fashion, we gave each other a big bear hug. A woman was walking past at the time, wheeling a trolley. She took one look at us, was absolutely disgusted, and said: "Bloody queers!" So this is what the world has become: two brothers showing some affection to each other are accused of being 'queer'. She was the queer and strange one, not me.

Your colleagues and customers' memories of your kindness & helpfulness will extend well beyond the end of this uncertain new economy. So stand up and make your statement – If there's something that needs to be done, do it now. Choose joy and



laughter and warmth rather than pessimism and despair. Choose to go for more, rather than less. Choose more enthusiasm and passion, not less. Choose to appreciate all of the wonderful things

around us, and to not dwell on the ugliness.

Above all, choose friendship and service rather than indifference.

And as for the Nanjing huggers, what happened to them? Well, they were all released about an hour later with a warning to not arrange a gathering again without permission, and to stop doing these crazy and depraved things that corrupted society. As my New York friend says, "Go figure." **SR**



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