

11 Reasons Why Compassionate Leaders Do Not Exist

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People generally find it difficult if not extremely challenging to describe compassion in tangible, specific terms. Dictionary definitions of compassion describe it as feeling pity, mercy, and sympathy. However, being compassionate is far more than feeling sympathetic or being kind to someone. According to Poorkavoos (2016), compassion can be defined as being moved by and feeling sorrow for another person's suffering and taking action to alleviate the pain felt by that person and this involves an authentic desire to help. Put simply, compassion is taking action to alleviate the sufferer's pain. In my opinion, taking action is the most important part of compassion and a key differentiator of a compassionate person from the rest.

Rinpoche (1992) says: “[Compassion] is not simply a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp recognition of their needs and pain, it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering”.

Compassion in the workplace could range from a dyadic act to a collective and organized act (Poorkavoos, 2016). Dyadic or individual *compassion* in the workplace is presented when an individual notices a colleague's problem, feels empathy, and takes action to help. This form of compassion depends on the compassionate person's initiative to provide help and support and does not necessarily rely on any support from the organization (Poorkavoos, 2016).

What Is *Compassionate Leadership*?

Compassionate leadership is more than just being a compassionate individual and caring for a colleague who is in pain (Dutton et al. 2006). A *compassionate leader*, as well as being a compassionate person, encourages compassion and caring in the wider organization. A compassionate leader encourages employees to talk about their problems and to provide support for one another. *Compassionate leadership* is about a) being a compassionate person and b) trying to create a culture whereby seeking or providing help to alleviate a sufferer's pain is not just acceptable but is seen as the norm (Dutton et al. 2006).

In the language of Emergenetics, *compassionate leaders* flex into the Social attribute or the part of your brain that is relational and considers others (Trotta, 2020). *Compassionate leadership* recognizes that every team member is not only a significant individual but also an essential thread in the fabric of an entire organization. They strive to enhance the happiness and well-being of their people by supporting them and giving them what they need to excel. *Compassionate leadership* is not focused on short-term or instant gratification; rather, it is focused on what is best for the individual, the team, the organization and it considers other factors that may influence or affect the situation at hand (Trotta, 2020).

What do *compassionate leaders* do?

Compassionate leadership means paying close attention to people and the challenges they face, both inside and outside of work. It means understanding and responding with empathy by making thoughtful and appropriate actions. Promoting equality, valuing diversity, and challenging power imbalances are also key to compassionate leadership. *Compassionate leaders* make clear connections between data about patient experience and their team members' personal experiences of work. They help the people they work with to keep this in their line of sight and explicitly use it to guide decision-making. Leaders who consistently work in these ways can release their staff's potential to innovate and improve outcomes and experiences of care and this, in turn, is reflected in the delivery of care that represents value for money.

Compassionate leadership is not, of course, always easy to do. In times of high pressure, compassionate approaches may be effectively 'switched off' (Beal, 2010) and the resilience of *compassionate leaders* can become compromised through working in challenging environments under high levels of stress. In these circumstances, compassionate leaders may find themselves with a dual role of both managing the system and fulfilling a duty of care to the teams of people that they manage and lead (Ballatt & Campling, 2011).

Why Is *Compassionate Leadership* Essential?

Compassionate leadership is more than just a feel-good add-on to your tool belt of skills. It's a requirement of modern leaders who want to navigate their people and organizations to sustainable success and a brighter future (Trotta, 2020). There might have been a time when *compassion* was viewed as a weakness. Those days are long gone. Today, leaders are expected to treat their people with a greater sense of caring and humanity and to respect the unique attributes and qualities each person brings to the team and organization (Trotta, 2020).

According to various research, *compassionate leaders*:

- Are more engaging, and can create higher levels of overall employee engagement
- Build robust, trusting relationships at all levels
- Are viewed as being strong
- Inspire greater collaboration within organizations
- Contribute to lower rates of employee turnover
- Inspire their people to feel more connected to one another
- Create environments where employees feel a greater sense of commitment to their organizations

In a study by Dr. Geil Browning (2018) about love in leadership, it was found out that building a culture of compassion and engagement is a business imperative with similar studies demonstrating that companies with engaged employees perform 200 percent better than those without.

However....

It is important to note that *compassionate leaders* are still lacking in most organizations. The non-existence of *compassionate leaders* is due to various reasons. Below are eleven (11) why compassionate leaders do not exist:

1. Not listening and not learning

If one is a leader it doesn't mean they know it all. A leader who is good at their job has to be surrounded by intelligent people who possess wisdom and smarts, thus he/she has listened to them and solicited their opinions. Give them the chance to contribute their expertise and strengths. Being stubborn or thinking you know it all kills compassion. Instead, be open to the growth that can come from allowing yourself to learn from others. Most leaders unfortunately are not willing to listen and learn and can be seen to favor the autocratic leadership style.

1. Not Communicating Mindfully

Compassionate leadership requires one to be mindful in their communication and this is something lacking in most leaders. As a leader, your ability to listen and learn will be enhanced tremendously by your willingness to communicate with others more mindfully. Do not monopolize meetings and conversations. Give people room to express themselves – and remember some of your team members may need more time to do this than others. Provide feedback on a continuous, collaborative basis. Ask thoughtful questions and stay present so you can receive thoughtful answers. You should also pay attention to body language—expressed by others and yourself (Trotta, 2020).

1. Exemplifying selfishness

Most leaders find themselves acting selfishly as they perceive some of their subordinates as rivals. Thus, the need to outperform those under them leads most leaders not to exhibit compassion towards their employees. Unbeknownst to them is that healthy competition can enhance performance and drive people to greater heights. However, greedy behaviors that come from unhealthy competition only poison the organization. You are not in a struggle with your people to see who can accomplish more or receive the most praise. You are there to inspire them and to show that you are willing to put forth the same effort you are asking of them.

1. Pressure for performance, productivity, and efficiency

This reduces the capacity of employees to notice another person is suffering. When people are overloaded and overwhelmed, they are less able to respond compassionately.

1. Organizational culture

A good example is that people may get the impression that compassionate behaviors are not acceptable or have no place at work. Fear of being seen as weak - or perhaps fear of burdening others - are some of the barriers to the sharing of pain. Some people fear that expressing their pain may affect the way they are viewed and ultimately jeopardize the future of their job (Poorkavoos, 2016).

1. Fear of being taken for granted

Some leaders fear that if they show compassion people might start taking them for granted, see them as a “soft touch” and take advantage of their compassion. Thus, they chose not to show compassion in the workplace.

1. Empathy Deficit Disorder (EDD)

Even though human beings are social creatures by nature, empathy does not come naturally to all of us. Some people are more empathetic than others. In more extreme cases, some people suffer from Empathy Deficit Disorder (EDD). Empathy Deficit Disorder is a pervasive but overlooked condition. Our increasingly polarized social and political culture of the past few years reveals that EDD is more severe than ever. It has profound consequences for the mental health of both individuals and society. Thus, some leaders may suffer from EDD and may not be able to show *compassion*.

1. Lack of shared values

Shared organizational values refer to what people in an organization believe is important. Organizational values sensitize individuals so they can notice certain situations and actions (Dutton et al. 2006) and shape sense-making (e.g., Smircich 1983); such values also provide an impetus for certain kinds of actions (O’Reilly & Chatman 1996). Organizational values communicate what is significant, and, as a result, they affect the compassion process. Lack of such shared values within an organization can rob the organization of compassionate leaders.

1. Lack of shared beliefs

Whereas values pertain to what is viewed as important, shared organizational beliefs capture what organizational members believe to be true (Trice & Beyer 1993). Shared beliefs that pertain to the permeability of boundaries between people’s personal and professional lives also apply to the understanding of patterns of compassion (Lilius et al. 2011). In organizations whose members believe that it is acceptable and desirable to know about a fellow member’s personal life and act on that knowledge (Ashforth et al. 2000). Individuals are more likely to share that they are in pain at work, and colleagues may feel more justified to notice, feel, and act to alleviate the pain. Lack of shared impacts on the showing of compassion at workplaces.

1. Structure and quality of relationships

Compassion is also shaped by the overall structure and quality of relationships between people in the organization. A dyadic episode of compassion is triggered and unfolds in the context of a relational fabric of the organization. The relational fabric of an organization is captured by both the patterning of network ties and the quality of the connections between people in those ties. When network ties are strong, news about someone’s painful circumstances is more likely to spread.

1. Leaders’ behaviors

The last cluster of organizational features that affect compassion at work involves leaders' behaviors. Leaders play a symbolic and instrumental role in signaling and modeling the necessary and appropriate responses to suffering. If they send a wrong signal and exhibit wrong modeling it affects the compassion climate within the organization. Such that where there is a lack of *compassionate leadership* it can be traced back to the leaders.

Conclusion

Leaders have to remember that *compassion* doesn't mean taking responsibility for solving other people's problems or pitying them. *Compassion* does rely on three things: noticing others' suffering, connecting with them cognitively and emotionally, and responding to them. By being *compassionate* you help others, help your organization, and you help yourself.

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