

Fact-File 29: Cultivating Compassion... in a practical leadership context



Extracts from our course Guide for **The Compassionate Leader**

Compassion – the Leadership link

'Leadership' and 'compassion' aren't words we hear linked together all that much. Although it's a quality enacted around us regularly, compassion is often seen as a somewhat distant, altruistic ideal cultivated by Christian saints and Buddhist monks – the unrealistic response of the naively sentimental, kind-hearted and soft-headed'.

- ❑ Many of us are conditioned to think if we show compassion at work, people will think we're vulnerable, have no backbone and they might even exploit our 'weaknesses'.
- ❑ Many managers still associate it with being 'mushy', taking a 'softly-softly' approach, detracting from a solid outcomes focus or diluting down hard decisions instead of being business-like, stern, stoic, even ruthless.

The popular perception of a good leader is someone who's tough, decisive, results-driven – who puts business before benevolence. We convince ourselves we can't make space for compassion and connection. Yet that's exactly what great leaders do make time for. They:

- ❑ Have the conviction, confidence and courage to cultivate connectivity and compassion.
- ❑ Care about connecting with people they lead.
- ❑ See connectivity as the conduit for almost everything else they do.
- ❑ Know if you want people to perform, you have to connect with them first

"Compassion - in terms of a benevolent attitude, a predisposition to help others - lifts us out of the small-minded worries that centre on ourselves by putting a focus on others. That simple shift allows leaders a sorely needed renewal of spirit that is crucial in sustaining not only themselves but also the efficacy of their leadership." Dan Goleman preface to *Resonant Leadership* by Boyatzis & McKee

Connectivity is *compassion in action*. It enables leaders to inspire purpose and instil hope, optimism and energy, because they *resonate*, *empathise* and *connect* with others around them – all of which are telling traits in building vibrant work relations, regulating and combating toxic emotions, relieving stress and restoring well-being.

Leaders lacking empathy, understanding and compassion can tend to become abrasive, burn-out, over-bearing and turn their teams toxic.

The Case for Compassion

Let's face it, there hasn't been a lot of room for compassionate leadership in workplaces – but this is changing. Over the past 10 years, most organisations have arrived at the recognition that emotions do matter for good work – that leaders need high levels of Emotional Intelligence. This interest in *leading with feelings* has opened the way forward to taking the next step: cultivating more compassionate leadership.

This shift to a more empathetic, caring and emotionally intelligent style provokes questions such as: "*What is compassion anyway? What does it take to be a compassionate leader? How does compassion fit into a practical leadership context and can you learn to be more compassionate?*"

Happily, research, most notably work conducted by Richard Davidson, professor of psychiatry and psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is shedding light on the still-emerging answers to some of these questions.

- ❑ Davidson's brain-scan studies with *functional magnetic resonance imaging* suggest you can train yourself to be more empathetic and compassionate.
- ❑ Scans revealed brain circuits used to detect emotions and feelings were dramatically changed in people with extensive experience of practicing compassion. "*We can take advantage of our brain's plasticity and train it to enhance these qualities*", says Davidson (www.news.wisc.edu/14944).

A raft of other researchers in HR and the human sciences are starting to reveal that compassion is a potent attribute in a number of key leadership areas. For example, compassion:

- ❑ Tunes-up our empathy, that in turn promotes more constructive, connective relationships
- ❑ Counters the physiological effects of leader-stress by calming bodily reactions
- ❑ Acts as an insulator to combat the harmful impacts of toxic emotions on body and mind
- ❑ Opens the gate to an array of other positive feelings like optimism and hope
- ❑ Is one of the keys to maintaining emotional balance and managing disruptive moods
- ❑ Helps build up reserves of resilience – the bounce-back emotion to handle set-backs

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- ❑ Builds up well-being and has the capacity to renew or sustain the energy level of leaders

Cultivating compassion also contributes to other constructive changes in how leaders lead, relate to others, and handle the unavoidable toxicity and stress of the job. Being compassionate can:

- ❑ Increase empathy and understanding that in turn increases the chance that staff will trust and want to connect with their leaders
- ❑ Help leaders emanate less disapproval and show more genuine concern, which makes them more approachable
- ❑ Increase connectivity which has a healing effect on people and enhancing impact on the positivity of work climates and culture
- ❑ Lessen toxic emotions like anger or anxiety and links to a more emotionally balanced and calm approach

Naturally, staff don't need much convincing about compassion. A 2000 Gallup poll of two million employees confirms the value of a more compassionate approach to leadership. It found most rate a caring boss higher than how much money they earn!

Components of Compassion

So far, we've talked about compassion's potential benefits but what makes up compassion? To answer this, we can't just rely on recent western psychology and ignore the venerably ancient Buddhist contribution, which counts compassion amongst its four main pillars.

In fact, the west has tended to focus on emotional dysfunction rather than how to cultivate positive emotions and compassion has been the most neglected. As Lorne Ladner points out in *The Lost Art of Compassion*, we've been taught to work with damaging emotions, but western psychology has not offered "even one clear, practical, well-researched method for people to use to develop compassion."

While east and west have differences in how we understand compassion, there's commonality on some of its essential components. For example:

1. Respect and caring: *Resonant Leadership* authors Boyatzis and McKee claim compassion "involves caring, curiosity, respect and real empathy" toward others, which is echoed by The Dalai Lama, who defines it as "a mental attitude,

associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect."

2. Empathy: In Buddhism, compassion is a deep understanding of the emotional state of another (which sounds like the western idea of empathy). It leads us to feel empathy. A slight reversal in western thought, where empathy is seen as what enables us to connect with others, which can lead us to feel compassionate.

"To the extent that we feel caring and connected with each other, we naturally refrain from harmful behaviours. Empathy and compassion are foundational for natural ethics and for positive social relationships. When we empathise and feel compassion towards others suffering, this stops us from doing things that would have a negative effect on them. When we feel others' suffering as our own, we cannot bring ourselves to harm them." Lorne Ladner *The Lost Art of Compassion* p. xvi

3. Selfless and unconditional: Both traditions see these as important conditions for compassion – to put others' needs before yours and not 'favour-trade', expect something in return or give or withhold compassion depending on whether we see someone as friend or foe. As Boyatzis and McKee say: "Compassion does not assume or expect reciprocity or an equal exchange. Compassion means giving selflessly."

4. Committed action: "Compassion is empathy and caring in action – a willingness to act on those feelings" say Boyatzis and McKee. The Dalai Lama resonates: "True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment characterised by action."

5. Benefiting others: In Buddhism, compassionate acts alleviate suffering. In the west, we speak of being benevolent without any thought of gain.

Becoming more Compassionate

Feeling genuine compassion can be difficult. It's easier when the relationship with the other person is filled with positive emotions – harder when such things are absent or even over-ridden by envy, resentment, dislike and indifference.

Compassion isn't a singular thing. As the figure on the next page shows, we think there are several levels or stages.

Here's some foundation steps and states for cultivating compassion:

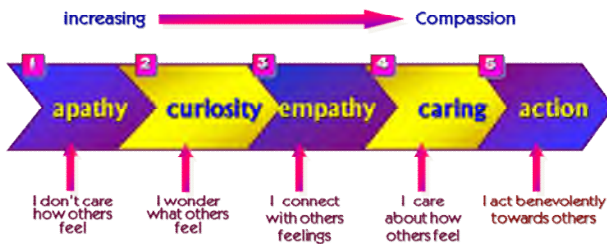
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- Curiosity comes first. We must be curious about what someone else is feeling and experiencing (eg 'I wonder what it feels like for them?' or 'What must they be going through?'). This enables us to move from apathy, indifference or self-focus to empathy.

Stages of Compassion



- Empathy comes next. It enables us to connect feelings-wise and understand what another person experiences. To do this, we need to be judgement-free. Disapproval cuts across empathy. This is not yet compassion, but it's a foundation. Empathy is more than just intellectual understanding. Mentally, I can understand without my feelings engaging.
- Caring is the next level. I can empathise with someone but still not care enough to act on those feelings. True compassion is heart-felt caring for the well-being of others – a state of genuine concern. Caring motivates action.
- Compassion in action. The real manifestation of compassion comes when we are willing to act. We can think and feel good deeds, but doing good deeds is what really counts.

Acting compassionately is essential, but there's one more thing. Compassion's a mental state we need to find firstly inside us – our intentions for being compassionate must be clear. We can do kind things or compassionate acts with good consequences, for example, but delving deeper, why are we doing this?

"Because compassion is a state of mind or of heart, it cannot be measured by a person's outwards behaviours (which) may appear benevolent, but the motivations are self-centred desire, fear, or habit rather than a genuine feeling of compassion." Lorne Ladner *Lost Art of Compassion* p. 13-14

Compassion: a Leadership dilemma

The core of compassion is heartfelt connection in situations where others are suffering and taking action when possible, to help relieve it. Through how they are and what they do, compassionate

leaders create emotionally healthy and positively energised workplaces. They:

- Genuinely care for others' well-being and are attentive to their needs, which they put before their own.
- Are aware of the impact their feelings have on others. They read what other people think and feel – an empathetic connection that keeps them in touch and in tune.
- Use positive emotions to inspire, and know how to dissipate toxic emotions that are dissonant and demoralising.

The dilemma is that while compassionate leaders work to relieve pain, leaders also create pain as an inevitable side effect of leading, as Peter Frost points out in *Toxic Emotions at Work*.

"All leaders create pain; it goes with the territory. In addition to sometimes providing inspiration and excitement, leadership is about pushing limits, setting new directions, and taking decisions that are not necessarily popular with one's followers... and they often feel angry, disillusioned, frustrated or afraid. Really good leaders understand these dynamics and take steps to mitigate, minimize or mop up the pain they create." Peter J. Frost, 'Handling the hurt: A critical skill for leaders' Reprint #9B04TA07 IVEY MANAGEMENT SERVICES Jan/Feb 2004

Toxic emotions – generated by you or picked up from others, leave a residual in the body that affects us badly, unless we have skills to learn to let them go. They slowly penetrate our defences. Bursts of adrenaline wear down our immune system resulting in physical and mental ill-health.

- The stress of leading – handling constant crises, hard decisions, always looking out for others, is draining. Reserves of resonance, empathy and connectivity dry up and even once-resonant leaders slip into dissonance.
- They become burnt out, dispirited, scratchy, abrasive and abrupt. "And, because our emotions are contagious, dissonance spreads quickly to those around us and eventually permeates our organisations," observe Boyatzis and McKee.

"Dissonant leaders wreak havoc. They are at the mercy of volatile emotions and reactivity. They drive people too hard, for the wrong reasons, and in the wrong directions. They leave frustration, fear, and antagonism in their wake. And they are often completely unaware of the damage they have done." McKee & Boyatzis *Resonant Leadership* p.6

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The Cure of practising Compassion

As we get busier and more stressed, we begin to lose 'groundedness' – we're thrown off-balance, focus, energy and equilibrium wane.

- ❑ We become distant and lose our sense of connection that's essential for compassion.
- ❑ We focus even more on us – how tired, behind-the-game and demanded-of we are – which disconnects us more.
- ❑ Prolonged periods of dissonance like this promote toxic emotions and behaviour that easily spread to infect the people you lead.

To counter these toxic effects leaders need to cultivate habits of mind and behaviour that dilute or relieve them. To return to resonance, we must renew ourselves through a conscious process of mental and physical practices to inspire, re-energise and counter these stress-effects.

“Research shows that positive emotions such as compassion have a decidedly constructive effect on neurological functioning, psychological well-being, physical health and personal relationships. Consciously engaging emotions such as hope and compassion, counters the physiological and psychological harm done by stress.” McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston *Becoming a Resonant Leader* p.38

Amongst the keys to renewal are practices for cultivating empathy, mindfulness, hope and compassion. Here are a few restorative practices to help you reconnect and cultivate compassion:

- ✓ *Become a more mindful observer of yourself.* Otherwise, you can't tell if you're going to dissonance. Do you seem more impatient, angry, frustrated, pessimistic or critical?
- ✓ *Practise empathy:* Take an extra few seconds to empathise, to acknowledge something the other person thinks or feels. Focus on how other people feel is compassion – and empathy also has a calming effect.
- ✓ *Re-connect with people:* the last thing you feel like doing when you're stressed and the first thing you should. Creating connective moments with family, friends, colleagues has a healing, supporting, calming effect.

- ✓ *Work out what really matters most:* Get back in touch with your personal vision, work out what actions you can take and do it.
- ✓ *Offer genuine forgiveness:* exercise tolerance for frailties of others. Forgive harsh words – they're hijacked by strong emotions. Ask yourself: 'If I did that to someone, would I want them to understand and forgive me?'
- ✓ *Do things that energise you:* spend time on a task that energises and interests you – one you find meaningful, extending, that gives you feelings of satisfaction/completion.
- ✓ *Rediscover an old hobby, talent or past-time.* As we get busier, we let things slip that use to relax, energise, positively challenge us. Rediscover them, or find a new interest.
- ✓ *Small acts of kindness:* Do something kind for someone every day. Appreciate, help-out, volunteer or simply take time to listen.
- ✓ *Practise contribution:* Instead of blaming, a bit of admission/humility boosts compassion – having the courage to acknowledge how you contribute shows understanding and calms.
- ✓ *Regular physical activity* helps drain toxicity. Walk. Cycle. Play. Garden. Dance.
- ✓ *Self-reflection.* There are mental disciplines you can use to focus thoughts, control emotional reactions, and take on new patterns of being, thinking and acting that invoke compassion.

Adopting a more compassionate leadership style can strengthen relationships and create a more supportive, less stressful work climate. But it can only happen if we dare to be different – to open ourselves up to new ways of thinking and being in how we go about our leadership and our life.

The Change Forum conducts practical 2-day coaching clinics for leaders who want to learn how to handle emotions better in the workplace. For a brochure or more information on **Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence or The Compassionate Leader...** ☎: 07-4068 7591
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