

MAINTENANCE WORKER, CEMETERY DIVISION¹

Teaching Note

Overview

This case is the story of a college student, Daniel Hodges, who took a summer job working as a maintenance worker in a cemetery. It includes Daniel's personal reflections on the topic of his compassion, and the lack thereof, while working in this job. The case reviews a series of events that occurred over the summer. Each of the events were opportunities for compassion, and Daniel responded differently to each one of them. Daniel sees himself as an ethical person who values compassion, but the extent to which he exhibits compassion varies from event to event. Daniel struggles to explain why his behavior varies between events. The case provides an opportunity for students to try to understand compassion more deeply, including how psychology, skill, relationships, and context all influence the compassion a person exhibits, and can be used as a way to help students reflect on how, when, and to what extent they will exhibit compassion at work, and also what they can do to help others exhibit compassion.

Objectives

Students who discuss this case in class should be able to

1. Explain what compassion is and why it matters,
2. Identify the skills needed to exhibit compassion and understand how to develop those skills,
3. Recognize obstacles that prevent people from exhibiting compassion, and
4. Apply principles of compassionate action across unique circumstances.

Preparation

It is recommended that students be assigned to read the technical note, "PPL-2020-105 – Compassion," along with this case. Also, the following questions may be assigned to students as they read the case and technical note:

¹ This teaching note was written by Ryan Quinn for the accompanying tool of the same name. This note provides suggestions for class discussion, and the tool may be used in other ways, or to reach other conclusions beyond those captured in this note. The goals for this tool include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations students may encounter in the future.

For each of the four stories, please answer the following questions:

1. How well did Daniel do at noticing suffering in this story?
2. How well did Daniel do at feeling empathic care for the people suffering in this story?
3. What difference did it make that Daniel felt empathic care, or if he did not, what difference could it have made if he had felt empathic care?
4. What enabled Daniel to feel the care that he did?
5. What obstacles prevented Daniel from feeling more empathic care?
6. What did Daniel do, or what could he have done, to overcome the obstacles to feeling empathic care that he felt?
7. How well did Daniel do at trying to relieve the suffering that others felt?
8. What difference did it make that Daniel tried to relieve suffering, or if he did not, what difference could it have made if he had tried to relieve suffering?
9. What enabled Daniel to relieve the suffering that he did relieve?
10. What obstacles prevented Daniel from being able to relieve suffering?
11. What did Daniel do, or what could he have done, to overcome the obstacles to relieving the suffering he saw in others?
12. What should the cemetery manager have done differently to help Daniel and his co-workers?

Please recognize that a case discussion that involves the topic of death may be a particularly difficult topic for some students. For example, some students may ask to not attend this class. Others may not want to participate in the class discussion. These are likely to be the minority of students, but you will want to be prepared in advance for possibilities like these. You will also want to manage the class conversation sensitively, and exhibit the compassion about which you will be teaching.

Proposed Timeline

This teaching note assumes a 75-minute class period. The following timeline is recommended for managing the class discussion, and can be adjusted based on different class lengths.

2-3 minutes	Welcome and Introduction
10 minutes	Open discussion of thoughts and feelings from the case
15 minutes	Event #1
15 minutes	Event #2
15 minutes	Event #3
15 minutes	Event #4
2-3 minutes	Summary and Transition

Instructions

After welcoming the students to the class and sharing any course information or reminders needed, introduce the class topic by telling the students that you will be discussing the topics of compassion and leadership today, by discussing the case of a student who took a job as a maintenance worker in a cemetery. At this point, you may wish to state explicitly that what made this job hard for Daniel, the protagonist in the case, and what sometimes makes the case hard for people to discuss, is the topic of death. Acknowledge that this can be a difficult topic for anyone, and may be a particularly for some people in the class in particular. Therefore, tell them that you would like to invite them to discuss the topic with some degree of reverence, and also that you want the discussion to be a safe one. People should feel free to express their thoughts or share their feelings without being judged by others. If someone shares a thought or a feeling with which you think you may disagree, before you disagree, ask them questions and try to understand why they think and feel the way they do. If you still disagree after you understand, that is fine, you can express that disagreement respectfully, but make sure you understand before you express your disagreement.

Open Discussion

Tell the students that you plan to discuss each event from the case with them. However, before you do, it may be useful to ask students if they have any general reflections about the case as a whole. Ask them if there was anything about the case that especially bothered them or that they especially appreciated, if they have any questions that they want to ask up front, or if there are any comments that they feel compelled to share. Some of the purposes for asking this are (a) to give the students a chance to express emotion they feel after reading the case (simply because some students may need to express emotion before they can discuss it), (b) this gives the instructor a chance to “take the emotional temperature” of the class, and therefore have a better idea about how to manage the class’ emotions before discussing the class in detail, and (c) to learn if there are any particular issues or questions that the class would benefit from addressing up front.

If class members do have comments or questions, remember that the initial comment or question may not fully or correctly represent underlying thoughts and feelings that a student also has. For example, a student may ask a question like, “What is a case about a student gravedigger supposed to teach us about business or leadership?” A student who asks a question like this may mean exactly what he or she says. However, a student who asks this question might really be feeling as if he or she does not feel comfortable discussing a case about compassion and death among his or her class mates. After all, sometimes business school or corporate classes can sometimes be highly threatening or judgmental social domains to many of the students in them. Given the possibility that students may have deeper thoughts and feelings that underlie comments or questions such as these, an approach of respect and inquiry becomes important for instructors. For example, with regards to the question about the relevance of this case, an instructor might first compliment the question (e.g., “That is an important question, thank you for asking it.”). Then, an instructor can invite reflection on the presented question (e.g., “Do you have any thoughts yourself about how it might be relevant?” If not, “Does anyone else in the class have any ideas?”). Possible answers include the fact that many jobs are service jobs, and many managers have to manager service employees; there is extensive suffering in organizations even if we do not see it, and ignoring it can actually lead to greater problems; opportunities for

compassion are opportunities to lead; and sometimes it is easier to see and learn from a stark example of a phenomenon (such as suffering and compassion) first, so that when we look for that phenomenon in more subtle settings, we have a better idea of what to look for. Once an instructor discusses the ostensive question respectfully, the instructor can turn the conversation back to the person who asked it, thank them again for asking it, and then ask the person what inspired them to ask the question in the first place. This gives the student an opportunity to express the thoughts and feelings that drove the question. There may be nothing else. However, if there is more to the question or the comment, then this becomes a powerful opportunity for the instructor to dive into deeper issues about compassion and leadership with the class.

The class may not have many (or may not have any) general comments or questions they wish to discuss in this introductory conversation. If so, that is fine. When the general conversation is done, simply proceed to discuss the individual events from the case. However, if, as the general conversation unfolds, specific topics come up from specific events the case, the instructor can use these as a segue to discussing the individual events of the case. In fact, even though the remainder of these instructions are organized according to the individual events of this case, an instructor should feel free to let the conversations move freely between the events. A comment that one student makes about one something that happened in one of the events may remind another student about something else that happened in one of the other events. If students make connections such as these, instructors do not need to force them to stay focused on a single event. Instead, instructors can invite students to compare and contrast the two events, based on the student's reasons for mentioning the other event. Once the comparison is done, the instructor can bring the conversation back to the original event if there is more to discuss in the original event, or can use the student's comment as a segue for transitioning to discuss the next event.

Event #1: The Graveside Service

The preparation questions ask students to apply twelve questions to all four events in this case, but some events provide details that are more rich for addressing some questions than others. Therefore, it makes sense, for each event, to focus the discussion on those questions that will provide the richest conversation. In the first event, it is useful to focus on empathic care. Thus, you might begin the discussion about this case by asking how well Daniel did at feeling empathic care for the family, followed by questions about what enabled Daniel to feel the care that he did, and what prevented him from feeling more empathic care.

As students discuss these questions, they may come to focus on Daniel's observations that he felt a slight connection, but could not bridge it, that he was more worried about the vault lid than the man who had died, or that he was unnerved by his reaction. Help the students to explore the question of why he felt a slight connection that he could not quite bridge. Daniel may have felt a slight connection simply because humans are biologically wired to feel empathy, and so it is hard to be around strong emotion without feeling some emotions ourselves. On the other hand, Daniel may have struggled to fully connect with the family because of a lack of experience with loved ones dying, lack of experience in the job that had him worried about the "correct" way to behave, or the norms into which the other maintenance workers were socializing Daniel.

Once the students identify these obstacles, it is useful to ask the students whether there was anything Daniel could have done to have felt more empathic care, and if he should have done that. Students may disagree about whether Daniel should have done anything. After all, many families may not want to interact with strangers when they mourn over a lost loved one. This is one example of where cultural differences matter. Some people may not want any interaction. Others may. Under some circumstances it may have been appropriate for Daniel or one of his co-workers to ask the family if there was anything else they wanted or needed after they had dropped their flowers into the grave and before they started filling it. Or they could have simply expressed their condolences before doing so. Or they could have asked permission before beginning. Or he could have thrown another coin into that grave so that the family would see him paying his respect. Some, none, or all of these options may have been a good way to express more compassion.

Part of what prevented Daniel from feeling fully connected with this family may also have been his inaction. Remember, compassion has three parts: noticing, feeling, and acting, and if any of these parts are left out, compassion has not been expressed. In fact, research suggests that sometimes empathy for suffering without compassionate action engenders negative emotions and stress reactions in the person who feels empathy. This could also explain Daniel's sense of disconnection.

If the actions of asking the family if they need anything else, expressing condolences, or asking for permission to begin were not appropriate in this situation, then another way in which Daniel could have dealt with his emotions might have been to re-frame his work as a service. If Daniel was framing his stoic waiting and lack of interaction with the family as inaction—as resisting impulses to empathy—then he could reframe his actions. For example, instead of thinking of his standing and waiting as “stoic professionalism,” he could have framed it as “being present and sorrowing with others.” Also, he could have re-framed his work to fill the grave as serving the family in their sorrow so that they would not have to fill the graves themselves.

Finally, when students bring up the possibility that the professional norms that Daniel is learning from his co-workers, instructors may want to ask them about the implications of those norms for practicing leadership. In this event, Daniel's co-workers are socializing him into specific conventions. As a newcomer to the organization, he watches their behavior and imitates, not sure of what else to do, and he infers that standing stoically is the professional thing to do. Those who have been doing this work for longer may take this behavior for granted as the only, correct, or appropriate thing to do. And standing by professionally can be seen as showing some degree of compassion. However, if leadership begins by exhibiting at least one virtue with more excellence than would have been exhibited if one had conformed to convention, then it may be worthwhile to ask if there is some way, in this situation, in which a person can exhibit compassion with even more excellence. Ideas such as the ones mentioned above are possibilities. Also possible is showing compassion to other people. For example, Daniel could show compassion for his co-workers by asking them, after filling the grave is complete, how they are feeling, and giving them a chance to express their sorrow or concerns.

It may be that none of the suggestions made here are appropriate. Students may also come up with ideas other than the ones suggested here. The point in this discussion is not to come up with some “correct” answer. The point is to see that there is more potential for compassion than people consider when they conform to norms, to understand why empathic care is sometimes hard to feel, and what can be done about it.

Before leaving the discussion of this event, it may be useful to make it practical to the students by asking them what professional norms inhibit compassion in their own workplaces, or in other organizations in which they participate, and what ideas they can take from this discussion about how to exhibit compassion with more excellence in spite of those norms.

Event #2: Five Burials

This event is different from the others, in that there is not a single person or group toward whom Daniel’s emotions were directed when the emotions occurred. Daniel includes this story because it is part of the set of experiences that seemed relevant to him as he tried to understand his experience with compassion while working at a cemetery. Therefore, students are likely to have had a little trouble answering the twelve preparation questions in relation to this story. One way to approach this discussion, then, may be to start with the first question: How well did Daniel do at noticing suffering in this story?

Students would be correct if they observe that Daniel had spent the whole week noticing suffering. The instructor may wish to follow up that question by asking the students who, exactly, was suffering during this second event. With a little thought, students should realize that the person who was suffering was Daniel. Then the instructor can ask, “Did Daniel notice his own suffering?”

This is a debateable question. On one hand, Daniel was certainly aware, or he would not have written about it. On the other hand, if we rely on the words that Daniel used in his own description, we must observe that Daniel does not label the experience as suffering. Nor does he appear to see this event as one in which the appropriate response is compassion. In fact, the focus of his story, at the beginning and the end, is his co-worker’s advice to put the cemetery out of his head once the wheels of his car touch the road. In fact, at the end he says that he “forced” himself to never think of the services in which he participates outside of the cemetery. This ignoring, burying, or hiding of his emotions, rather than expressing compassion for his emotions, suggests that perhaps he did not notice his suffering at all. Or at least that he did not notice it as an experience for which the appropriate response would be compassion.

Once students understand that Daniel was suffering, and that he needed compassion, the instructor can raise the question of how Daniel could have acquired the compassion he needed. There are at least two answers. One is that Daniel could be compassionate to himself. It would be entirely appropriate for Daniel to accept and feel concern for himself, and also to take action to relieve his suffering. The instructor can ask students for suggestions as to how Daniel could seek to relieve his own suffering, and may get answers such as talking to friends or family, exercising, taking time off, engaging in religious or spiritual practices, and so on.

A second way in which Daniel could acquire the compassion he needs is to ask for it. If he told family, friends, or co-workers what he had gone through that week, they probably would have been happy to give him a listening ear, some time and attention, or just care and concern. Many of us struggle to ask for compassion because it makes us feel weak or needy, but the truth is that everyone suffers and everyone needs compassion. Asking for it may be a way to exhibit the virtue of courage.

Again, a good way to make this discussion practical to the students themselves may be to ask them about when they are likely to need to find compassion for themselves, especially at work.

Event #3: The Cremation

Daniel himself asks the question upon which instructors may wish to focus at the end of this event: “Why did everything I had studied and researched not helped me to be more compassionate?” If students do not bring it up on their own, and the students have read the technical note, “PPL-2020-105 – Compassion,” then it would be useful for the instructor to direct their attention to the discussion of self-betrayal and self-deception in the section, “Barriers to Compassion.” If students apply these ideas to Daniel’s situation, they can see how, by ignoring or resisting small impulses to exhibit empathic care over time, following the example of his co-workers, and using their rationalizations to justify these self-betrayals, he may have created a system of self-deceptions in his mind that inured him to the suffering of people who came to the cemetery. Given the socialization Daniel received from his co-workers, very little of this was likely to have been intentional—on his part, or on the part of his co-workers. This was just “the way things are” at the cemetery.

If Daniel was participating in self-deception at this point in his cemetery experience, then the obvious question becomes, “What can Daniel do to get out of self-deception and become more capable of exhibiting compassion again?” As the technical note points out, we undo the effects of self-deception by questioning our rationalizations and identifying where they are wrong, questioning our own perceived virtue, looking for the virtue in others, and refusing to see ourselves as victims. Thus, it would be useful to ask the students for specific suggestions of how Daniel could have done this with the woman in the cemetery shop. As the students come up with ideas, the instructor can again make this practical by asking the students for circumstances or relationships in which they might be participating in self-deception at work, and how they could apply these same principles there.

Event #4: In the Sun

At this point, it may be useful to begin the discussion by simply asking students why compassion might be hard in this event. There are many possible answers, including the self-deception discussed in Event #3, the exhaustion of digging in the hot sun, or even just the fact that no one is there. Empathic concern is easier to feel for others when those others are present. Why, then, does Daniel keep digging? Perhaps he feels more empathic concern and exhibits more compassion than he gives himself credit for. Or if not, then perhaps he is exhibiting other virtues, such as responsibility, integrity, or persistence. A cynic may also say that it is because he

wants to keep his job, or some other utilitarian answer. In fact, any or all of these answers may be at least partially correct. This is a nice way to end the discussion about Daniel because it provides us with a way to point out that Daniel is both a good person, trying to be virtuous to the extent of his knowledge and ability to do so, and also an imperfect human, just like the rest of us. In that sense, he is a good model for all of us as we try to learn how to lead with virtues like compassion.

Before summarizing learnings from the discussion of Daniel's experience, however, one last question should be considered. Where was Daniel's manager throughout this story, and what should this manager have done throughout Daniel's experience? Like Daniel and his co-worker's Daniel's manager was probably also susceptible to the presumed professional norms, and it may have never occurred to his manager to do anything other than what he or she did. However, students should consider what Daniel's manager would have done if he or she has been striving to exhibit more excellent compassion. For example, the manager could have created sessions for employees to talk about the emotional experience of interacting with people who have lost loved ones. The manager could have checked in on the employees to see how they were doing, exhibiting compassion for those employees. The manager could have explored the possibility of interacting with the loved ones of the departed in more compassionate ways, and perhaps even created routines or procedures to support and facilitate such interactions. Students may be able to come up with other suggestions as well.

Conclusion and *Leadership Amplifier*

As the discussion of the four events comes to a conclusion, instructors can help summarize what students are learning by asking them to identify and share a specific idea or practice that they could apply to exhibit more excellent compassion in their work or their lives. If the instructor is also using *Leadership Amplifier* in the class, this may also be a good opportunity to encourage students to apply what they are learning by making one or more plans now, in class, to practice leadership using compassion.