

LEADING WITH COMPASSION¹

Consider the customers who have been knocked out and dragged off of airplanes² or who must endure endless phone calls with electronic assistants without being able to speak to a human being.³ Consider employees who are dismissed summarily in massive layoffs⁴, who labor under unreasonable deadlines or workloads, or who are devalued by their managers. These are just a few examples of countless stories of suffering that happen in organizations, some large some small. Sometimes organizations cause suffering. Sometimes people suffer because of events outside of work, but they suffer inside organizations simply because work takes much of our time. Often people suffer silently in organizations. They feel uncomfortable sharing their suffering for many reasons. Suffering is more present at work than we often realize, and it carries many hidden costs for organizations⁵. Its impact on human cost and also on financial performance can be staggering.

Compassion is a virtuous response to suffering. It is distinct from acts of kindness because people can be kind even when there is no suffering. Also, even though compassion involves emotion, it is more than just emotion. Compassion occurs when we notice suffering, feel empathic care for that suffering, and try to relieve the suffering.⁶ Thus, the emotions of empathy and care are critical components of compassion, but emotions alone are insufficient. If a person fails to notice that another person is suffering, or does not try to relieve the other person's suffering, then no compassion has occurred, even if a person feels empathy and care.

Compassion is valuable in its own right, because noticing, feeling empathic care for, and trying to relieve suffering are among the most humanizing activities in which people can participate. Compassion improves our relationships, makes life more meaningful, and shapes our character. However, compassion also influences performance and experience in our workplaces. For example, employees who experience compassion at work are more likely to be committed to the organizations in which they work and to engage in activities that build their workplaces in ways that go beyond the responsibilities in their job descriptions⁷. Compassion can even inspire innovation and contribute to competitive advantage.⁸

¹ This note was written by Daniel Hodges and Ryan Quinn.

² Zdanowicz, Christina, and Emanuella Grinberg. "Passenger Dragged off Overbooked United Flight." CNN. Cable News Network, April 10, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/10/travel/passenger-removed-united-flight-trnd/index.html>.

³ Johnson, Gregg. "Your Customers Still Want to Talk to a Human Being." Harvard Business Review, December 19, 2017. <https://hbr.org/2017/07/your-customers-still-want-to-talk-to-a-human-being>.

⁴ Freeman, Kenneth W. "A Guide to Being Compassionate During Layoffs." Harvard Business Review, February 25, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/02/a-guide-to-being-compassionate-during-layoffs>.

⁵ Worline, M., & Dutton, J. E. (2017). *Awakening compassion at work: The quiet power that elevates people and organizations*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

⁶ Dutton, J. E., Worline, M. C., Frost, P. J., & Lilius, J. (2006). Explaining compassion organizing. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 51(1), 59-96.

⁷ Moon, T. W., Hur, W. M., Ko, S. H., Kim, J. W., & Yoo, D. K. (2016). Positive work-related identity as a mediator of the relationship between compassion at work and employee outcomes. *Human Factors and Ergonomics in Manufacturing & Service Industries*, 26(1), 84-94.

⁸ Worline, M., & Dutton, J. E. (2017). *Awakening compassion at work: The quiet power that elevates people and organizations*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

In spite of all of these advantages, compassion does sometimes have costs. Sometimes people take advantage of those who exhibit compassion, and those who repeatedly exhibit high levels of compassion often become fatigued by the experience. Exhibiting compassion at work also sometimes requires people to deviate from professional and business norms, because many people define professional work as a domain that should be distinct from emotions and interpersonal concerns (“It’s just business!”). Even in relatively compassionate workplaces, excellent compassion can still involve deviating from convention, which may make others uncomfortable and engender negative reactions.

The fact that compassion often involves deviating from workplace norms means that suffering provides people with an opportunity to lead. If leadership begins with a person exhibiting at least one virtue (such as compassion) with more excellence than she would have exhibited if she had conformed to convention and concludes when others feel inspiration, elevation, appreciation, awe, or respect for that action and choose to follow⁹, then a person who is skilled at and motivated to respond compassionately to suffering has the potential to engage in many opportunities to lead in professional organizations. To develop this skill and motivation, it is helpful to understand why compassion matters, what skills it requires, and how to navigate the pitfalls that sometimes accompany compassion.

Why Compassion Matters

One reason why compassion matters is because it is a virtue. Philosophers have proposed some highly technical definitions of virtue¹⁰, but here we will focus on virtues as standards moral of excellence that people exhibit in their actions, such as compassion, courage, integrity, and humility. Standards are abstract in principle. For example, the standard for compassion is that in order for a person to exhibit compassion that person must notice, feel empathic care for, and try to alleviate suffering. That abstraction is what makes virtues like compassion applicable across situations. For example, compassion from a call center employee for a customer whose product is broken will look different from compassion from a nurse helping a patient suffering from cancer. Thus, compassion matters because it is a moral standard. Many—probably most—cultures across the earth accept compassion as an ethical imperative. It is moral because it contributes to the good life, both for the person who exhibits it, and also for those who receive it or witness it.

Compassion may be a virtue, but research suggests that when people are involved in strong situations with pressure to conform to less-than-fully-virtuous behaviors, one of the reasons why people give in is because they have not thought sufficiently about why it is

⁹ <https://business.louisville.edu/positiveleadership/ppl-teach/whats-pos-ldr/>

¹⁰ For example, MacIntyre (1981, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN.) defines virtues as “acquired human quality[ies] the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods.” This is a good and widely-accepted definition, but one which requires more explanation than we have room for in this note. Therefore, we will approach our discussion of virtues in a way that is simpler, but still consistent with many of the theorists, philosophers, and empiricists who write on this subject.

important to enact a given virtue.¹¹ Therefore, even if virtue is its own reward, we are all more likely to exhibit a virtue such as compassion if we have explicit reasons for doing so.¹²

The first and most obvious reason to exhibit compassion is because it helps those who suffer. It helps people recover from harm, whether that harm is physical, relational, psychological, social, or financial. Compassion increases positive emotions and decreases anxiety. It communicates dignity and worth. It increases the recipient's commitment to their organization in which they received compassion.¹³

Compassion also creates many benefits for the people who exhibit it. For example, compassion is associated with lower perceived stress, less depressive symptoms, more satisfaction with social support, and better marital adjustment.¹⁴ Compassion tends to preserve friendships.¹⁵ Also, those who practice compassion experience more happiness and self-esteem.¹⁶ Compassion can also increase one's personal satisfaction, strengthen their identity as a moral person, and help them to be perceived as leaders.¹⁷

Organizations also benefit from the compassion exhibited by their managers and employees. For example, compassion can help to mitigate the over \$375 billion dollars lost by organizations annually because of the absenteeism, diminished productivity, medical and legal costs, and turnover created from employees' grief and stress.¹⁸ Compassion also increases collaboration¹⁹, and opens up opportunities for innovation and competitive advantage.²⁰

¹¹ Maio, G. R., & Olson, J. M. (1998). Values as Truisms: Evidence and Implications. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(2), 294-311.

¹² Maio, G. R., Olson, J. M., Allen, L., & Bernard, M. M. (2000). Addressing Discrepancies between Values and Behavior: The Motivating Effect of Reasons. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 104-117.

¹³ Brody H. 1992. Assisted death—a compassionate response to a medical failure. *N. Engl. J. Med.* 327(19):1384—88; Clark C. 1987. Sympathy biography and sympathy margin. *Am. J. Sociol.* 93:290-321; Grant AM, Dutton JE, Rosso BD. 2008. Giving commitment: employee support programs and the prosocial sense making process. *Acad. Manag. J.* 51(5):898-918; Lilius JM. 2012. Recovery at work: understanding the restorative side of “depleting” client interactions. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 37(4):569-88; Lilius JM, Worline MC, Maitlis S, Kanov JM, Dutton JE, Frost PJ. 2008. The contours and consequences of compassion at work. *Organ. Behav.* 29(2):193-218.

¹⁴ Steffen, P. R., & Masters, K. S. (2005). Does compassion mediate the intrinsic religion-health relationship?. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 30(3), 217-224.

¹⁵ Sanchez, M., Haynes, A., Parada, J. C., & Demir, M. (2020). Friendship maintenance mediates the relationship between compassion for others and happiness. *Current Psychology*, 39(2), 581-592.

¹⁶ Mongrain, M., Chin, J. M., & Shapira, L. B. (2011). Practicing compassion increases happiness and self-esteem. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12(6), 963-981.

¹⁷ Stamm BH. 2002. Measuring compassion satisfaction as well as fatigue: developmental history of the compassion satisfaction and fatigue test. In *Treating Compassion Fatigue*, ed. CR Figley, pp. 107-19. New York: Brunner-Routledge; Grant AM, Dutton JE, Rosso BD. 2008. Giving commitment: employee support programs and the prosocial sense making process. *Acad. Manag. J.* 51(5):898-918; Melwani S, Mueller JS, Overbeck JR. 2012. Looking down: the influence of contempt and compassion on emergent leadership categorizations. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 97(6):1171-85.

¹⁸ Zaslav J. 2002. New index aims to calculate the annual cost of despair. *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 20, pp. D1, D12; Rosch PJ. 2001. The quandary of job stress compensation. *Health Stress* 2001(3):1—4 Rynes SL, Bartunek JM, Dutton JE, Margolis JD. 2012. Care and compassion through an organizational lens: opening up new possibilities. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 37(4):503-23.

¹⁹ Dutton JE, Lilius JM, Kanov JM. 2007. The transformative potential of compassion at work. In *Handbook of Transformative Cooperation: New Designs and Dynamics*, ed. SK Piderit, RE Fry, DL Cooperrider, pp. 107-26. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press.

²⁰ Worline, M., & Dutton, J. E. (2017). *Awakening compassion at work: The quiet power that elevates people and organizations*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Skills for Compassion

Each of the steps of compassion are skillful accomplishments, particularly if people who suffer are in workplaces in which the cultural norms promote keeping one's suffering to oneself. In such settings, people may try to hide the emotions or information that might indicate suffering. As a result, noticing suffering often requires some degree of mindfulness, especially in a work organization, where concerns about tasks often overwhelm concerns about relationships. Even if a person is mindful enough to pay attention to people's subtle emotional and contextual cues, they must also have the skills necessary to recognize and interpret those cues appropriately. Perspective taking is an example of a cognitive skill which can enhance a person's ability to make sense of disparate cues that may indicate suffering. Also, active listening may be needed to acquire sufficient cues to detect someone's suffering. As with any skill, these skills, and the others associated with compassion, only improve with practice.

Skills may also be needed in order to feel empathic care for another person. Although empathy is a natural, biological response in humans²¹, the empathy we feel for others can be impeded easily by assumptions or rationalizations we make, sometimes unwittingly.²² Feeling empathic care in spite of the uncharitable thoughts we often have toward others requires people who are capable of humbly questioning their own beliefs and perceptions of themselves, considering more positive intent in others, and allowing rather than resisting empathic care when it occurs.

The skills associated with trying to relieve others' suffering depend on the suffering they are experiencing and the context in which they are experiencing it. For example, a call center employee who wishes relieve the suffering of a customer requires conversational skills and problem-solving skills, while a doctor who wishes to relieve the suffering of a patient may require years of medical training to provide the relief that a patient needs.

Barriers to Compassion

Compassion is a natural and common response to others' suffering, but it is not always practiced. People may be prevented from experiencing and enacting compassion because they encounter barriers to noticing, feeling, trying to understand, or trying to relieve suffering. For example, people are most likely to feel compassion in face-to-face interactions with people they already know well and care about. Geographical, relational, cultural, or metaphorical distance from a person who is suffering can impede people's ability to notice suffering or to feel compassion for someone whose suffering is noticed.²³ Even if people notice and feel others' suffering, social factors such as peer pressure, bystanders, or directives from people in authority

²¹ See, for example, Ochsner, K. N., Knierim, K., Ludlow, D. H., Hanelin, J., Ramachandran, T., Glover, G., & Mackey, S. C. (2004). Reflecting upon Feelings: An fMRI Study of Neural Systems Supporting the Attribution of Emotion to Self and Other. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 16(10), 1746–1772.

²² Warner, C. T. (2001). *Bonds that make us free: Healing our relationships, coming to ourselves*. Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain.

²³ See, for example, Brown, B. (2017). *Braving the wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*. Random House; Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Lucifer effect. *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*.

positions²⁴ may overwhelm inclinations toward empathic care, such that they choose to ignore or reject the impulse to understand and relieve the suffering.

Terry Warner, a philosopher, referred to the choice to ignore or reject one's own impulses for empathic care toward other people as "self-betrayal."²⁵ He called it self-betrayal because of the impact it has on one's own psychological health and social well-being when people make this choice. This choice impacts our health and well-being because human brains are wired to explain, or justify the decisions we make. If we choose to not act upon our impulses for empathic care, we have to justify that decision to ourselves, and the way we do that is by telling ourselves that others are unworthy in some way of our care, by inflating our own virtue relative to the people toward whom we are refusing to care, and by seeing ourselves as victims of the people who we have refused our care. These justifications tend to fill us with blame for others and hurt for ourselves, so that our relationships become increasingly defensive, passive-aggressive, sullen, offended, prejudiced, or antagonistic.

This cognitive process, which begins with self-betrayal and ends with actions that damage relationships is called "self-deception," and it happens in a fraction of a second within our minds. If we do not recognize and stop this thought process, our capacity for compassion is severely diminished, if not impeded entirely. We prevent this process from occurring by allowing ourselves to feel empathic care and choosing to act on its impulses to the best of our ability. We undo the effects of this process by admitting the ways in which we are wrong, deflating our own perceived virtue, looking for the virtue in others, and refusing to see ourselves as victims when the problem is within us and not a result of others' actions.

Some scholars have proposed that one barrier to exhibiting compassion may be compassion fatigue. This term is so compelling, in fact, that it has spawned three decades of research. However, a recent review of this research suggests that this term may actually be misleading.²⁶ The term was introduced to explain why caregivers in professions such as nursing and mental health become burned out as they try to provide compassion for the people they serve year after year. However, this research appears to be riddled with conflicting definitions and concepts, which lead to questionable findings. Caregivers in any industry do, without question, encounter problems, including fatigue or even exhaustion. However, the causes of this exhaustion often have more to do with other issues involved with the expression of compassion than the compassion itself. For example, the fatigue may have less to do with compassion than it has to do with stress or burnout in general. It may also be a result of bureaucratic, resource, supervisory, or physical impediments to people's efforts to exhibit compassion. It is especially exhausting when people feel empathy for others' suffering, but are unable to act on that empathy, either because of their own lack of skill, because of rules or norms that prohibit action, because of a lack of resources or because of other obstacles. In fact, some research suggests that compassion itself tends to rejuvenate rather than exhaust, even though the workload itself may be exhausting. Employees and managers can both do things to eliminate, mitigate, or overcome

²⁴ See, for example, Milgram, S. (1974). Obedience to authority. New York: Harper; Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 8(4p1), 377.

²⁵ Warner, C. T. (2001). *Bonds that make us free: Healing our relationships, coming to ourselves*. Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain.

²⁶ Sinclair, S., Raffin-Bouchal, S., Venturato, L., Mijovic-Kondejewski, J., & Smith-MacDonald, L. (2017). Compassion fatigue: A meta-narrative review of the healthcare literature. *International journal of nursing studies*, 69, 9-24.

these obstacles, such as making exceptions to rules when appropriate, deviating from norms, providing resources, learning skills, providing training, providing alternative opportunities to exhibit compassion, or being compassionate toward those who are experiencing obstacles.

Sometimes cultural differences are a barrier to compassion because they make it hard to notice, understand, and respond appropriately to others' suffering. This is because people from different cultures may express their feelings about suffering and receive compassionate overtures differently from people from one's own culture. In fact, misunderstanding can inhibit compassion even when people's cultures are highly similar. For example, a person may misunderstand the specific situation through which a suffering person is enduring.

Not every barrier to compassion can be overcome, but many can. For example, in the workplace, a manager can overcome distance problems by spending more time managing by walking around, paying explicit attention to what is going on in their work and in their lives, and trying to understand their interpretations of experience. Managers can resist social pressure by being explicit about their reasons for why they should be compassionate²⁷ and being specific about exactly how they will resist pressure.²⁸ Managers can overcome self-betrayal by questioning their own virtue relative to others and then allowing themselves to feel others' feelings. Those who exhibit compassion should also engage in proper self-care: getting adequate sleep, eating better, exercising, investing in other personal relationships. People can also avoid or address problems such as burnout or abusers by being strategic about how they practice compassion.²⁹ For example, they can complement their work with being compassionate in settings that allow them to have a more direct impact on those they serve, or they can learn tactics for recognizing people who tend to abuse others' compassion and focus their time and attention away from such people.

Callousness, Sentimentality, and Pity

Aristotle argues that all virtues exist at a "golden mean," which exists in-between vices of deficiency and excess. This is true for compassion as well. Callousness is a deficiency of compassion. When people are callous, they do not see suffering or do not feel empathy for suffering.

When people are not fully callous, but still fail to reach the golden mean of compassion, they tend to experience pity or sympathy. When people feel pity or sympathy, they tend to notice suffering and feel empathy for it, but they still look down on or think less of the sufferer.³⁰ When people perceive pity rather than compassion from others, they tend to feel demeaned and hurt further, damaging the relationship between the sufferer and the caregiver. Compassion involves suffering with the sufferer, seeing them as fully human, as equal. This can be as simple as just

²⁷ Maio, G. R., Olson, J. M., Allen, L., & Bernard, M. M. (2001). Addressing discrepancies between values and behavior: The motivating effect of reasons. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 37*(2), 104-117.

²⁸ Sheeran, P. (2002). Intention—behavior relations: a conceptual and empirical review. *European review of social psychology, 12*(1), 1-36.

²⁹ Grant, A. M. (2013). *Give and take: A revolutionary approach to success*. New York: Viking Press.

³⁰ Brown, B. (2017). *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Penguin Random House.

being with people as they suffer. However, we can also show compassion rather than pity when, at the appropriate times, we demand more of those who are suffering. For example, consider how physical therapists help patients recover from traumatic injuries. They believe in the sufferer's ability to improve, heal, and grow, and therefore demand that the sufferer continue to push themselves, even when it is painful or difficult. Pity might lead the physical therapist to hold the sufferer to a lower standard because they want to eliminate the suffering, rather than suffer with the sufferer. However, when people are compassionate, they not only suffer with the sufferers, they also maintain their standards because they still see the person as fully human, capable of growth, and want to help them achieve that growth.

An excess of compassion can take the forms of sentimentality. Sentimentality occurs when people are so emotional about others' suffering that they are unable to be constructive in their efforts to relieve suffering. Over-emoting often leads others to feel uncomfortable rather than comforted, even if that emotion is expressed with regard to their suffering. Compassion involves seeking to understand how the sufferer needs to receive compassion, rather than just giving compassion in the form that the giver wants to give.

Other virtues can help people as they try to achieve the golden mean of compassion, in between callousness, sentimentality, and pity. For example, when a person practices humility, they are less likely to look down on or think less of a sufferer, avoiding callousness or pity. When they practice temperance, they are less likely to over-emote or over-react about the suffering, avoiding sentimentality.

Organizational Applications

Managers may practice compassion to avoid problems such as the public relations crises that come from knocking out passengers and dragging them off of airplanes, the lost or irate customers that come from making customer service needlessly obtuse, the disengaged employees who believe they are seen as cogs in a heartless machine, or the turnover, absenteeism, and health costs associated with suffering in the workplace that has no accompanying compassion. Compassion can certainly prevent problems, and mitigating such problems takes managerial work because it is likely impossible to avoid suffering completely.

Compassion can do more than just help managers avoid problems, however. Compassion also provides an opportunity for managers to lead. One way to understand organizations is to see organizations as being composed of conventions, such as routines, standard operating procedures, policies, strategies, norms, traditions, and so on. When people participate in these conventions, they typically exhibit a "normal" degree of compassion, because conventions involve actions and actions exhibit more or less compassion. The compassion exhibited (or not exhibited) in conventions may have emerged unintentionally as the convention evolved.³¹

If managers exhibit compassion with more excellence than they would have exhibited if they had conformed to convention, and they seek to do so in a way that recognizes and tries to

³¹ Dutton, J. E., Worline, M. C., Frost, P. J., & Lilius, J. (2006). Explaining compassion organizing. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 51(1), 59-96.

incorporate the appropriate viewpoints of others regarding what constitutes compassion in a given situation, then people who see those managers' actions are likely to feel inspiration, elevation, appreciation, awe, or respect, and are likely to choose to follow.³² People can exceed convention even in simple acts. When people follow these actions over time, new conventions emerge. Those who lead have the potential to create more compassionate conventions, and ultimately, more compassionate organizations.

It all begins when individuals choose to practice noticing suffering (small or large), practice feeling empathic concern for that suffering, and try to do something to alleviate that suffering.

³² See, for example, Haidt, J. (2000). The positive emotion of elevation. *Prevention and Treatment*, 3(3), online; and Vianello, M., Galliani, E. M., & Haidt, J. (2010). Elevation at work: The effects of leaders' moral excellence. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(5), 390-411.