Leadership And Compassion

By CompassionLab ((See http://www.compassionlab.com/), Jane E. Dutton, Jason Kanov, Jacoba Lilius, Sally Maitlis, Monica Worline)

Our work on how organizations foster compassion is based on interviews with employees in a variety of settings and studies that track how compassion responses unfold following traumatic events in employees’ lives. We have found that leadership—at all levels within an organization—is critical for creating a context for meaning and a context for action that, taken together, foster organizational compassion. Here, we attempt to summarize the implications for leadership, which we hope will inspire ways of thinking that are helpful and useful.

Starting Assumptions

1. The capacity to be compassionate and to express compassion is universal.
2. Institutions (work, family, religious, etc.) enable or disable this innate capacity to express compassion. Institutions magnify or depress the effects of individual compassion as they facilitate or retard mobilization efforts, interpersonal and intergroup coordination/cooperation and resource extraction.
3. The expression of compassion is a healing act for both those who participate and those who receive it.
4. Compassion is more than feelings of empathy. It involves taking action (however small) to relieve suffering.
5. Compassion in organizations contributes to human healing (the capacity to draw from inner resources to lessen suffering), human resilience (the capacity and rate of recovery from setbacks) and human attachment to the groups who express compassion.
6. The effectiveness of compassionate organizing can be assessed by considering the scope, scale, speed and customization of compassionate responses to the needs of individuals and groups who are suffering.

Providing a Context for Meaning

People are struggling with trying to understand what is happening. What does this mean? How will my life change? How will we get through this?

- Power of providing certainty when uncertainty abounds: certainty about the security of people’s jobs, or their place in the organization when the circumstances require that they be absent, be distant or be distracted.
- Power of providing the personal connection as the backdrop for “making meaning.” A leader’s visibility and a member’s access to leaders during this time create a relational foundation for people’s sense of security and safety. The more access and visibility, the better.
- Power of presence and listening. Just being there matters a lot.
- Importance of the language used. The language needs to allow for the expression of pain and human suffering as part of the path toward healing. Language of efficiency, ‘business speak,’ etc. may not have the same power for healing and encouraging expressions of common humanity that are essential to the activation and coordination of compassion.
- Importance of affirming the values of the culture give people a sense of relatedness, competency and autonomy. If these three basic needs are met, it gives people the motivation and sense of resourcefulness to take initiative and sustain action.
Leadership affirmations of an organization’s values, such as "We are a community," "We value people as whole human beings, not just as employees," are particularly comforting.

- Importance of leaders using their status, visibility and power to: (1) communicate what the organization is doing, (2) keep communication lines open, (3) expedite and make accessible the allocation of resources and (4) surpass what people expected or thought was possible.

**Creating a Context for Compassionate Action**

- The importance of leaders creating a context where organizational members have flexibility to express pain and to provide compassion in a way that is unique to the needs of the individuals and situation involved.

- Leaders can encourage/enable the use of existing networks (formal and informal links between people inside and outside the organizations) and routines (established and well-used ways of accomplishing tasks) to craft compassionate responses that build on an organization’s current competence. Established networks and routines are part of the organization’s know-how that can be applied to how it coordinates and delivers compassion.

- Much of this compassion will emerge from the initiatives of groups and individuals who are outside the formal hierarchy of the organization or are in less powerful positions. Often, these individuals or groups have expertise and networks that enable effective compassionate action. Leaders should expect and encourage emergent, bottom-up compassion-organizing efforts.

- Early actions matter, symbolically and instrumentally. They send important signals about the values (i.e., of the organization), the efficacy and the possibilities for future action.

- There are important amplifier mechanisms that expedite extraction of resources and coordination of care from the organizational system. Two important amplifiers include:
  
  a) Compassion stories that inspire others to act and which carry wisdom and hope about what is possible in the organization.
  
  b) The power of positive spirals that happen when people help each other, watch helping, and are inspired, unleashing human resourcefulness and more caring.

**Footnotes:**

These ideas are based on an ongoing collaborative research program of the CompassionLab (Compassionlab@umich.edu) whose members include Jane E. Dutton (University of Michigan), Peter Frost (deceased, University of British Columbia ), Jason Kanov (Seattle University), Jacoba Lilius (University of Michigan), Sally Maitlis (University of British Columbia), and Monica Worline (Emory University) .

These ideas formed the basis of an article that is called “Leading in Times of Trauma”, published by Harvard Business Review, January, 2003.


The idea that there are three basic needs borrows from R.M. Ryan and E.L. Deci (2000), "Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being." American Psychologist. 55 1, 68–78.

The power of positive spirals involving the dynamics of positive emotions and positive meaning comes from the work of Barbara Fredrickson.