White Paper

Compassion Revealed

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Key Points:

- "Organizational compassion" is a social process in which employees collectively acknowledge that pain is present, share and express their empathy, and respond to suffering in a collective way.
- Experiencing compassion in times of suffering helps employees resume or reengage with their work.
- The impact of compassion at work extends to those who witness it or participate in its delivery.
- Leaders can foster conditions that facilitate compassion.
- Organizations can take active steps to institutionalize compassion by implementing structures and programs that effectively facilitate the process.

Introduction

Suffering comes in many forms and from diverse sources. It may stem from events in an employee's personal life, such as the loss or illness of a loved one, the breakup of a romantic relationship, or physical or mental illness. Suffering also can be triggered by events within the workplace, such as incivility from colleagues, stress from downsizing or change, or pain from overwork. Regardless of whether these events occur within or outside of the organization, suffering is a ubiquitous feature of all workplaces. This is not only a human concern, but also a financial one. For example, employee grief costs U.S. businesses about $75 billion annually, while job stress and burnout have been estimated to cost industry hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Perhaps grief and suffering could be healed more fully if compassion were unleashed in work organizations. This brief overview of the triggers and kinds of suffering found in organizations clearly conveys the importance of compassion at work and how to utilize it in multiple ways.

The Interpersonal Process of Compassion:

1. Noticing Suffering

Noticing suffering involves awareness of the presence or possible presence of suffering.

2. Felt Empathic Concern

Felt empathic concern is the feeling of compassion — the "suffering with" that emotionally connects one person to another who is suffering. Empathic concern plays an important role in connecting the awareness of suffering to a response of some kind.

3. Compassionate Responding

Compassionate responding refers to actions that occur in response to suffering with the aim of lessening, alleviating, or making it more bearable. In organizations, responding can take many forms. For example, compassionate actions might include emotional support, material goods, and the granting of time and flexibility.

"Organizational compassion" refers to the collective and social aspects of work organizations, in which people who notice suffering share information and perspectives with one another. This ignites empathy within many members of an organization and drives them to co-create some kind of collective response. This shared acknowledgement that suffering is present often leads to coordinated action to address or alleviate pain.

Beneficial Consequences of Compassion for Those Who are Suffering:

Employees who experience compassion in times of suffering are more likely to:

- Feel acknowledged and legitimated to move forward through grief or difficult circumstances
- Recover more quickly because of key resources (e.g., emotional support, time and flexibility, material goods) that may be provided as part of the compassionate response
- Believe that their work organization values and cares about their well-being
- Feel more satisfied in their jobs and more committed to their organizations
- Experience positive emotions while at work
- Direct caring and supportive behavior toward others, thereby facilitating patterns of compassion spirals. For example, supervisors who feel that their organization values them and cares about their well-being are more likely to direct supportive behaviors toward their subordinates

Beneficial Consequences of Compassion for Others:

The positive impact of compassion at work is not limited to those who are suffering. Employees and members who participate in responding to suffering with compassion, or who simply witness others extending compassion, also experience beneficial effects, including:

- Coming to understand an organization's values in relation to how colleagues are treated
- A feeling of elevation, which is a positive emotion that makes us want to emulate inspiring behaviors
- Becoming more receptive to others' social support, which in turn helps to mitigate stress

Acting with compassion is also important for individual agents who, as part of their job, must sometimes engage in behaviors that cause others pain (e.g., downsizing agents), and are often quite painful for the agents themselves. Engaging with and responding to the suffering inflicted on another not only helps the person in pain, but also allows the harm-doer to navigate the difficult situation and to maintain his or her moral identity

Beneficial Consequences of Compassion for the Organization:

- Providing compassion during the delivery of bad news has positive effects on an organization's reputation, and on stakeholders' intentions to engage in organizationally supportive behavior.
- Engaging in compassion at work has implications for how connected individuals feel to their organization, work colleagues, and ultimately to key organizational outcomes. This heightened connection to others culminates in a greater commitment to one's organization, with well-established implications for important organizational outcomes such as lower levels of turnover.
- Sharing compassion among work colleagues contributes to an organizational capability for cooperation by generating relational resources, strengthening shared values, and cultivating critical relational skills.

How the Organizational Context Shapes Compassion:

Although compassion is fundamental to being human, everyday realities of organizational life and pressures for productivity and efficiency often obscure or drive out human moments at work. These realities also can reduce the likelihood that employees will have the capacity to notice suffering, the emotional bandwidth for empathetic concern, or the time or resources for responding. Given potential

barriers to the expression and coordination of compassion at work, it is important to understand different ways that organizations can foster compassion.

Conditions that Foster Noticing of Suffering:

These factors make it more likely that coworkers will notice suffering:

- <u>Rich forms of interaction</u> allow colleagues to notice the often subtle signals that someone is struggling. unlike virtual work arrangements and back-and-forth email chains, physical spaces, structures, and communication routines that bring colleagues into regular and close contact (e.g., face-to-face via daily or weekly department meetings, open workspaces) provide opportunities for establishing baseline understandings of what one's colleagues are typically like. This creates opportunities for noticing when individuals deviate from their typical selves, which may be an indication that they are suffering.
- <u>High-quality relationships</u> between people are distinguished by how they feel (mutual, positive regard, and vitality) and how they function (process more emotional information, more flexible, and more open). Relating to one's colleagues in this way provides familiarity about their usual state and behaviors. The quality of connections in an organization also affects whether someone who notices a change in the condition of a colleague feels comfortable to inquire further about what is happening. Higher-quality relationships impact the degree to which employees have enough trust in their colleagues to share their painful circumstances.
- <u>Organizational norms</u> around the nature of the boundary between work and non-work can shape how appropriate and typical it is for colleagues to share personal details and struggles.
- <u>Strong leadership</u> enables those in high-level positions to set an important tone for the value of noticing suffering. The way a leader speaks about suffering and models attentiveness to others' suffering can establish and reinforce values that let others know it is appropriate and necessary to know about each other's lives and pay attention to the pain and suffering of colleagues.

Conditions That Enable Empathic Concern:

Creating an environment that values empathy involves:

- <u>High-quality relationships,</u> which shape the ease with which one can take the perspective of another, heightening the likelihood of empathic concern
- <u>Organizational values</u> around the importance and appropriate ness of putting humanity on display foster open expressions of pain that also can facilitate empathic concern
- <u>Leadership,</u> which plays an important role in enabling felt empathic concern by modeling expressions of emotion more generally and care and concern more specifically

Conditions That Enable Responding:

Organizations that wish to foster a culture of responding to suffering should consider:

- <u>High-quality relationship</u>s between work colleagues, which provide a foundation for understanding how to best meet the unique needs of the sufferer, thus lowering the interpersonal risk involved in responding. Relationship quality also affects the competence of the response
- Leaders who demonstrate compassionate responding legitimize it as a worthy endeavor. Leaders can model responses to suffering and encourage and empower others to also respond. Leaders

who make responding to suffering a normal part of how they spend organizational time and resources reduce the uncertainty and vulnerability that may otherwise inhibit people from taking action when they notice pain

Institutionalizing Compassion:

Organizations can take steps to institutionalize compassion by implementing structures and programs that enable noticing, feeling, and responding to pain.

Designated Roles

An important and enduring means of institutionalizing compassion is through the formal designation of roles that include the detection of and response to human suffering. For example, ombudspersons, grief counselors, and patient advocates are all roles in which an explicit part of the job is to detect and respond to employee's pain at work. The designation of formal roles for handling problematic interactions buffers organizations from interruptions and disturbances that could detract from their effectiveness. They also allow deployment of more skilled practitioners to deal with human suffering than might be otherwise available.

Formal Programs

Formal programs that ease and systematize the process of compassion come in several forms. Some programs facilitate peer-to-peer support as a means for facilitating and delivering compassion. For example, in some organizations employees can chose to regularly contribute to a fund that provides financial support for employees if they face emergency conditions. In other organizations, employees can chose to donate vacation time that other employees-in-need can draw on if they face a family emergency. Organizationally endowed and legitimized programs facilitate responses to employee pain in ways that minimize employees' struggles in their jobs. At the same time, these programs often endow the organization (and by implication its employees) with the reputation and identity of being caring and compassionate. However, programs need to be implemented in ways that facilitate authentic expressions of compassion so that this human response is not experienced as forced or disingenuous.

Conclusion:

Suffering and compassion are critical and pervasive aspects of every organization. By being blind to compassion, we are missing fundamental and important aspects of organizational life. Leaders and executives that understand the importance and vast implications of compassion in the workplace will do their work differently. They will take active steps to foster conditions that facilitate compassion, and they will make efforts to institutionalize compassion in their organization. With fresh eyes, there is much to see about organizations and organizing using the lens of compassion.

Take Action:

- ✓ Bring your colleagues into regular and close contact with each other through rich forms of communication, routine interactions, and open workspaces.
- ✓ Cultivate high-quality connections among colleagues that help you notice when something is amiss, and inquire more comfortably about causes of suffering.
- ✓ Model the kinds of responses to suffering that you would like to see from others.
- ✓ Express emotion, care, and concern as part of your daily work.
- ✓ Implement structures and formal programs that facilitate the process of coordinating resources in order to allow your organization to more quickly and easily respond with compassion.

* This paper was summarized by Penelope Mallinckrodt (Ross MBA'13), based on chapter 21 of Cameron and Spreitzer's (Eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship (2012).

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