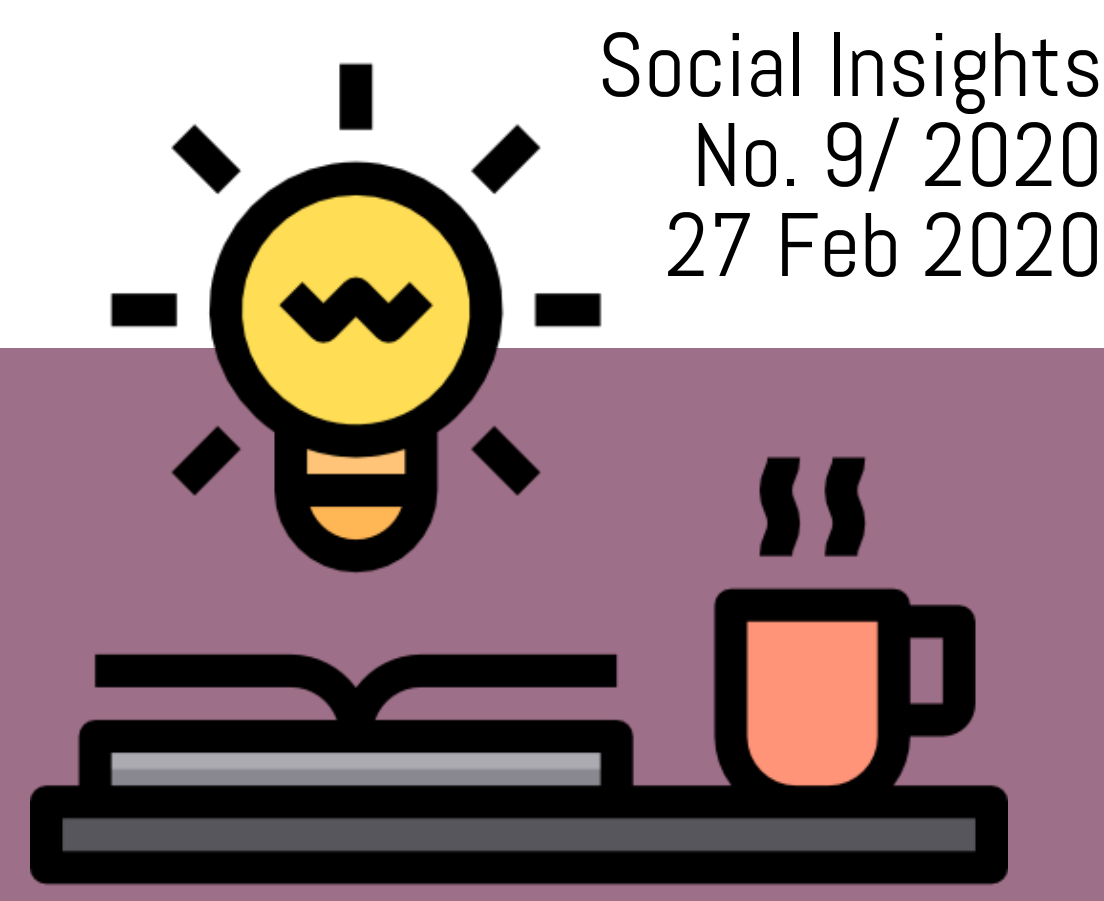


COMPASSION: AT THE HEART OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP



This letter, written by Ms Ang Bee Lian, can be found in "Weaving compassion: Relational Understandings and Practices" (2019) produced by the Counselling and Care Centre.

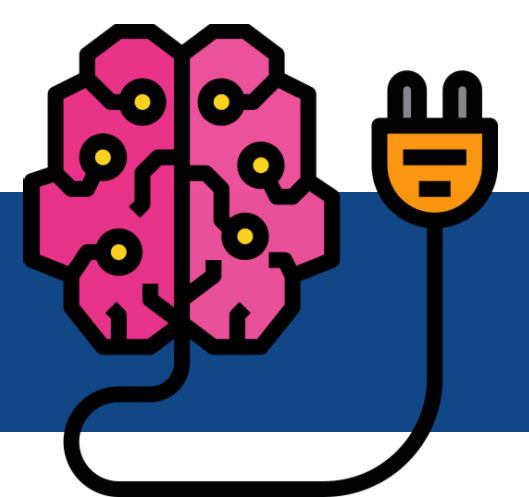
As you read this, you may be wondering what a chapter on management and leadership is doing in a book about compassion. When we think about compassion, we often think about it in the context of therapy or the helping professions. It is unusual for compassion to be the first thing we think about in the context of leadership and management.

In recent years, however, the concept of compassionate leadership has been growing around the world. An article in the Harvard Business Review mentioned that compassion is key to better leadership and to fostering stronger work connections (Hougaard, Carter & Chester, 2018). This comes as no surprise as a heart of compassion values the inherent worth of people and takes active steps to move towards them in care and concern. Speaking at Wharton's graduation ceremony, LinkedIn Chief Executive Officer, Jeff Weiner, mentioned that compassionate leadership means "walking a mile in the other person's shoes; and understanding their hopes, their fears, their strengths and their weaknesses. And it (means) doing everything within (one's) power to set them up to be successful" (Weiner, 2018).

What leaves a positive imprint on others is not so much the charismatic communication abilities or management skills of leaders, but the care and compassion that they have shown for those under their care. Cristiano Ronaldo recounted an incident of Sir Alex Ferguson's compassion in a BBC documentary that left an impact on him. This incident even led him to call Ferguson his 'football father'. In 2005, Ronaldo's father was in a coma in the middle of the Champion's League season. Ronaldo expressed concern to Ferguson over his father's condition, to which Ferguson replied, "Cristiano, if you want to go one day, two days, one week, you can go. I'm going to miss you, I will miss you here, because you're important, but your daddy is in first place" (Lang, 2015). That was compassion in leadership.

So where does compassion come in for leaders in our many walks of life? What exactly does it look like to practise compassion when we lead and manage people? Let us first begin by exploring what compassion is.

Compassionate Leadership: More than Empathy



Tibetan scholar, Thupten Jinpa, the English translator for the Dalai Lama defined compassion as "a mental state endowed with a sense of concern for the suffering of others and (an) aspiration to see that suffering relieved" (Tan, 2012). For Jinpa, compassion has three components:

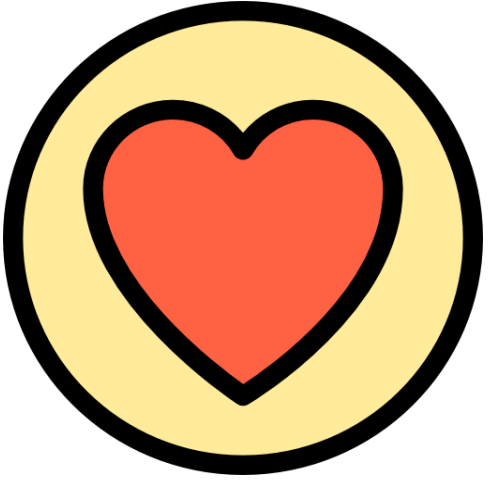
a. A Cognitive Component: "I understand you."



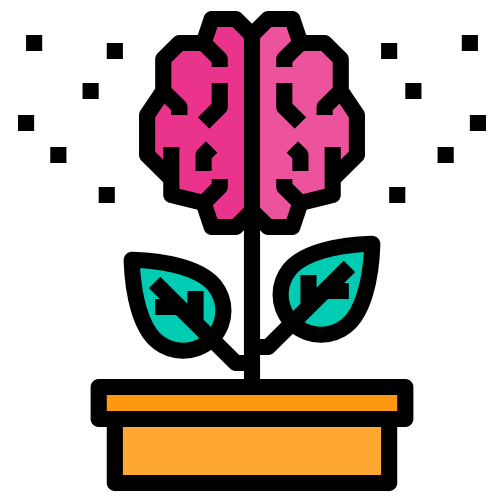
When people know that you are seeking to understand the situation that they are in – be it the pressures of juggling work and family life, or a challenging project or colleague – they gain a sense of assurance that you are listening to them, that you are not minimising their struggles and that you are trying to 'get' what they are going through.

b. An Affective Component: “I feel for you.”

Going beyond the cognitive level, people also want to know that you understand how they are feeling in response to the situation they are in; that you ‘feel’ what they feel. This is where leaders have to learn to have empathy. It may involve recalling uncomfortable emotions that you may have felt before, but it is a crucial step in allowing oneself to really connect emotionally with others. However, leaders need to be careful not to be overwhelmed by the emotions of both their staff and themselves.



c. A Motivational Component: “I want to help you.”

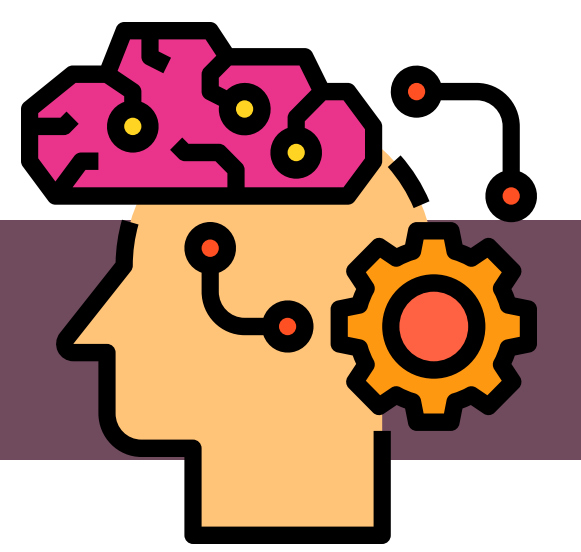


This is the part where compassion becomes more than just empathy. It involves a commitment to and an attitude of wanting to do all within one’s power and ability to help the other person. This gives those whom we lead the assurance that their best interests are being sought. It is this kind of assurance that makes it easy for staff to take leave or a day off, especially in urgent situations, without the fear of rejection or being marked down.

For those in leadership and management positions, compassion means that we view staff not just as a means to an end of getting work done, but as individuals to care for and nurture. Compassionate leadership then is not merely a skill that we need to learn, but a shift in the mindset and attitude in how we view those whom we lead and manage. It involves our mind, heart and will.

Practising compassionate leadership may involve more energy and time on the part of the leader or manager. Compassion seldom fits neatly into a busy schedule. However, it will create a working culture of trust and encourage those under us to innovate and to explore without the fear of being marked down for failure. Just as how a child needs an attachment figure to provide him with a sense of security and safety in order to explore the world, employees also require that sense of security and safety from their leaders as they learn to take risks and develop at the work place.

Misconceptions About Compassionate Leadership

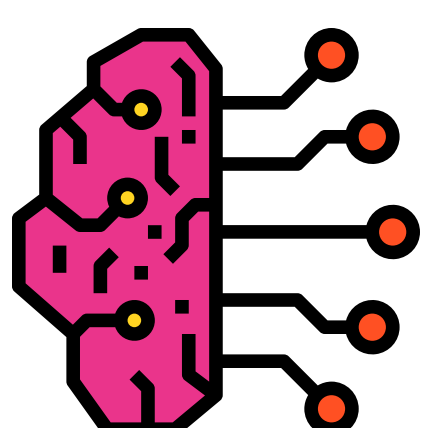


Being Nice



While compassionate leadership has its many benefits, some may be sceptical about its application because of the fear of being seen as a push-over or the fear of producing employees who lack respect for them and who will take advantage of them. These fears likely stem from a faulty understanding of compassionate leadership. For example, some think that showing compassion as a leader simply means being nice to subordinates and being in perpetual agreement with them. However, this is far from effective leadership. Compassion does not mean that leaders are soft and let their employees have or do anything they want. There will be times when leaders have to say no or challenge the views of their staff. However, this should not be done from a place of impatience, spite or harm, but with a desire to guide, challenge and mentor. When people are assured that their well-being is well looked after by their bosses, they are likely to have greater respect for them and receive challenges with more openness.

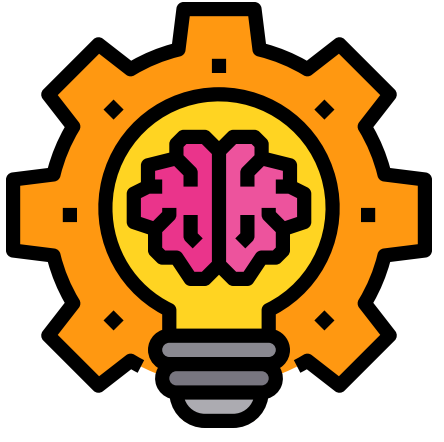
Accountability



Another myth is that compassionate leaders cannot hold people accountable for their actions. This is not true. A leader can be compassionate and simultaneously hold those under them responsible for their actions. Effective leaders ensure that their staff understand the expectations that they are held to and the effects of their actions and behaviour.

When they fail to meet these expectations, compassionate leadership does not mean we overlook their responsibility, it means that we seek to understand the circumstances and motivations behind their actions or inaction. This will then shape the way we respond to them.

Emotional Responses



Compassionate leaders also need to remember that they are not responsible for the emotional responses of their staff. For example, staff may respond in tears or anger towards disciplinary action, however, this should not stop leaders from enforcing them when necessary.

Leaders cannot control how their staff respond to the various circumstances that happen at work or in their lives. But the way leaders respond can make a huge difference to their experience. We need to listen attentively, put across our concern for them, and possibly assist them in discovering solutions for work and even non-work issues. Compassionate leaders help to guide their staff to process their emotions, yet not play the role of a therapist to them. This is an art that requires skill and wisdom when putting into practice: to be compassionate and yet not cross the line into emotional dependence.

Organisational Goals and Excellence



Some may think that by focusing too much on the welfare of our staff, we end up neglecting the work at hand. However, compassionate leadership does not mean that leaders are not committed to the production of excellent work or the pursuit of organisational goals.

Compassionate leaders are not called to throw their visionary and strategic minds out of the window. They continue to do what leaders do – to support teams, build collaborations, manage outcomes, produce quality improvements and raise productivity. However, being motivated by compassion ensures that this pursuit is not done at the expense of the well-being of those they lead.

Learning to be More Compassionate



For many people, practising compassion while meeting the demands of management and decision making are not easy twins. While the outworking of compassion can be a trainable skill, the transformation must start from within oneself. Leaders who desire to be more compassionate often go through a transformation within themselves that enable them to stop focusing on their personal ego needs but instead, to focus on the well-being of their staff, on ameliorating the suffering of others and on the challenges that they face. It requires a daily reminder to place the well-being of our staff above ourselves or the work that needs to get done. The more we put on a compassionate mindset and attitude, our compassion muscle will start to strengthen and the more intuitive it will be to have compassion for others.

Compassion helps to establish trust and creates a safe space for feelings to be shared and mistakes to be made without the fear of being condemned. If we are compassionate, and look to understand others before we react, they will feel safe in expressing their feelings, knowing that we will not leap to judgments but will instead help them figure out how to navigate their situation or difficulty.

Sometimes, leaders show compassion only towards people who seem perfect or whom they personally favour. This should not be the case. Compassion should be shown to all staff regardless of who they are or whether we 'like' them or not. As leaders, we need to be mindful of any personal bias we may have in the way we view and treat different people. Compassionate leaders should be ready to act effectively when members of their team look for support or when they need help. This does not mean condoning bad conduct, but it means creating a safe space for clear and transparent communication where even undesirable behaviour and attitudes can be addressed. This will encourage healthy relationships as well as a more empathetic work environment. Remember that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

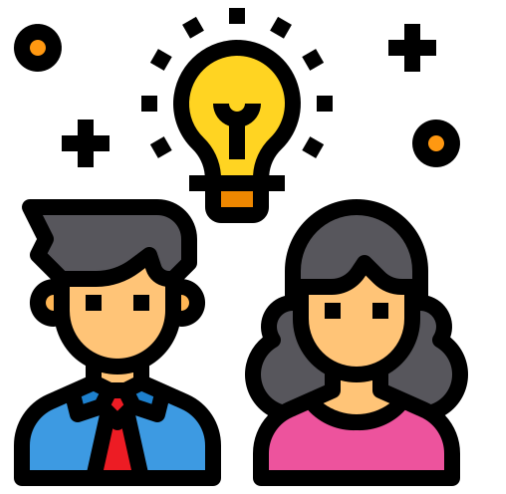


Leading with Compassion

So how does compassion look like in practice? How do we integrate a compassionate mind and heart into the way we manage and lead those under us? While there is no fixed instruction manual on how to be a compassionate leader, I will explore some ways in which compassion can be demonstrated as a leader at work.

a. Building Relationships and Knowing Your People

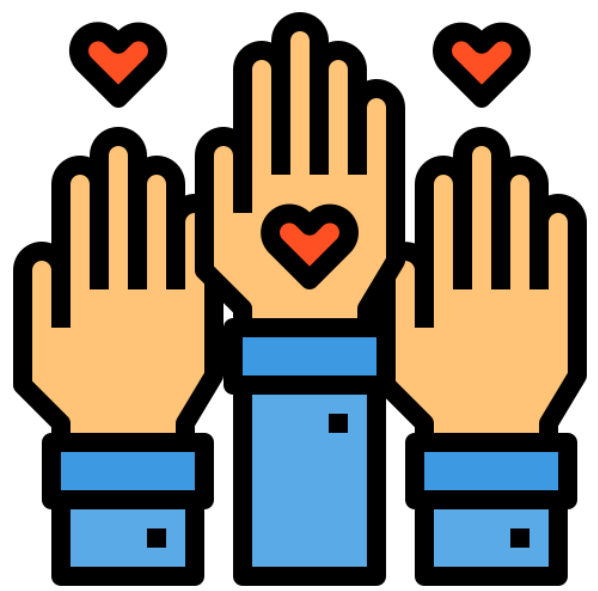
As mentioned above, compassion involves seeing staff as human beings and not simply as work machines. We may not intentionally set out to do the latter but it is easy to fall into it, especially when we are overwhelmed with work or face pressures and challenges from our own management or supervisors. Even staff who are not in managerial positions can easily fall into this trap. For example, when a new intern joins the team, it is not uncommon to see workers getting excited because more hands are on deck to help with the menial work. Sometimes, they give them work to do without even bothering to get to know them as persons. While it is not wrong to get interns to help with the work, we are not being compassionate when we see them only as 'work helpers'.



One fundamental aspect of being a human being is to exist in the context of relationships. Compassionate leaders build relationships with their employees. They get to know their ambitions, fears, strengths and weaknesses, and beyond work, to find out more about what matters to them like their families or hobbies. This is not to blur professional and personal boundaries, but to aid leaders in serving their employees better. For example, if one knows that a staff member has been facing burnout looking after her mother with dementia, a compassionate leader should try not to overload her with work and gently refer her to external support if necessary. While getting to know our people may take time and effort, it will allow us to take necessary steps to ensure the welfare of our staff. This is especially necessary in the social service sector to prevent burnout.

As leaders in the social service sector, we should exemplify the values that we want our workers to show clients – to be one who journeys alongside another with a non-judgmental and compassionate attitude. Workers who feel well-supported by their bosses in this manner are likely to produce better work and serve their clients more effectively.

b. Investing In and Developing Others



Because compassion is about the well-being of others, investing in others and nurturing them is often one of the natural responsibilities that come with leading with compassion. Compassion provides the motivation to nurture others and facilitate their growth. It is not satisfied with staff doing well in the present but is more concerned about their personal and professional growth for the future. It secures the long-term performance, growth and development of people in their own right, whether they eventually remain in your team or not.

To invest reasonably well, we need to appreciate the future and the opportunities and risks it entails. We can then invest in helping our people gain broader insights into the complexities of social issues and a greater capacity to continue being the best that they can be in spite of constant frustrations and disappointments. We need to stay on course as leaders to instil a sense of having a shared mission and to be considerate leaders who can lead and inspire employees to take an interest in higher-level concerns. To do this, leaders need to be intellectually stimulating and be able to articulate a shared vision of jointly acceptable possibilities. We need to frequently raise standards, take calculated risks and get others to join us in our vision of the future.

Mentoring is one way in which we can invest in and develop others. At its core and at its best, mentoring is a highly customised activity that considers a person's particular skills, context, and opportunities. With the guidance and support of a good mentor, one can realise his full potential. Such relationships, if well-developed, can have significant payoffs even though they are time-intensive and can be more expensive than group training. In the social service sector, however, mentors often offer their time as a gift. Good mentoring pushes the individual's thinking skills, challenges his assumptions, and holds him accountable for improvements. Mentoring is about customisation so that the individual can develop a contextualised approach to applying his skills. Mentoring as a relationship then enables the individual to do his best work without having to follow a prescribed path to achieve the desired results.

c. Identifying With Our People

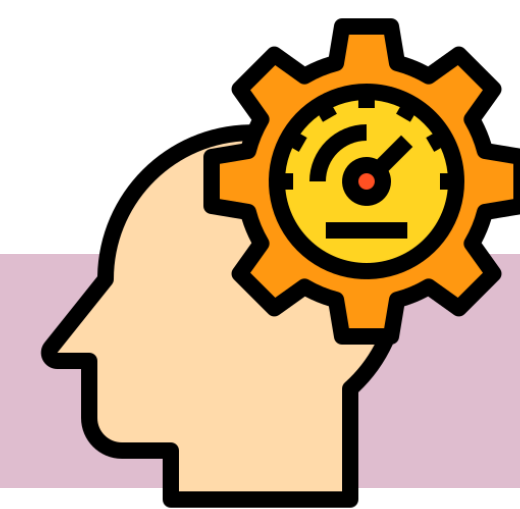


Leadership requires courage to do what is right even when this means taking people to task. Exercising compassion, however, will shape the approach and the handling of the delicate situation. When a project goes awry or someone makes an unsalvageable mistake, it is natural to react with disappointment, and sometimes anger or anxiety.

Compassion brings the moment back to being human. Compassion steers the leader to think about how those involved would be feeling and get a better sense of what he would need to do to repair the situation.

Some people get stressed and restless in their work. They may face conflicting pressures to be compliant with the demands of changing expectations to produce results for the organisation. Good leaders will be brave enough to meet these fears and struggles, subjecting themselves to the same pressures faced by our people. Whatever burdens are placed on our people, we must be sure to bear those burdens as well. Practising compassion then cultivates a sense that 'we're all in this together'. When our people see us enduring the same difficulties as them, we gain their respect and their loyalty. Good leaders meet their teams where they are, and position themselves as a resource. If someone is in a stressful situation, or carrying a lot of anxiety, practising compassion can unleash the 'stuck' feeling in the person.

Leadership Moving Forward



As leaders, we should continually develop our brains, courage, soul and heart when leading and managing our organisations and teams.

- **Brains:** We should develop a deep knowledge in our area of work and stay updated on the current research on what works and how different elements or factors contribute to or influence outcomes. Good leaders will want to ensure that they remain competent and continually refresh their vision.
- **Courage:** We should have the nerve to be bold enough to move toward our vision even with incomplete information or risky odds after deep thinking and analysis.
- **Soul:** We should be clear about the values that we stand for. Good leaders should lead with a compass and not by radar. While aware of the world around them, good leaders are oriented to a true north that does not waver. In contrast, a leader who makes decisions by radar will be constantly changing in response to external stimuli.
- **Heart:** We should be passionate about what we believe in and show compassion. Passion and compassion will be the root of our decisions and concern for others.

As we enter an era of fresh young, mid-career, diversely-skilled people entering the social service sector, our challenge is to stay focused on what the people we serve need from us to make their lives better, whether it be in protecting them, giving them hope or helping them reach their potential.

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