



CASSA Conversation Starters: Compassionate Leadership

When we think of the leaders, the colleagues in our lives who have made a difference, we often think not only of the skills and abilities these individuals had but more often than not, we think of their personal qualities. Were they a good listener, were they fair, were they approachable, did they inspire and model? These questions come to mind and when the qualities are shared, compassion is heard repeatedly. What do people mean by compassion? What made the difference, and how can we all work to not only lead with compassion as an individual, but as organizations and systems?

We believe that compassion is a leadership quality that can be refined and honed. Compassion may indeed part of a person's natural disposition, but we can also constantly work to refine and reframe how we bring care and compassion to the leadership work at the individual and system level.

To begin the exploration of compassion in leadership, it's important to look at the definition and context of compassion. What is this trait, how would we define it, and how does it unfold in practice? In the leadership world, when people talk of compassion, they often talk about someone who shows a true interest, a connection, and a caring disposition. They care about the work, they care about the people, and their sense of care was palpable. They made you feel "seen."

Compassion itself is essential, however it is also insufficient. Compassion is not care alone but denotes action. This move to action differentiates between compassion and empathy. To be empathetic is to be able to take the perspective of others, to feel the emotions of the other person. Compassion is the next step, moving from those feelings and thoughts toward a desire to act in support.

Compassion can also mean that you care enough to confront. When something doesn't "sit right" or there is something that needs to be put on the table for conversation, you find a way to broach the subject or topic. Compassion does not mean that you care so much about everyone's feelings that you are afraid to give difficult messages. Compassion is care, it is empathy, but it is also empathy and care in action for the greater good.

How does that action unfold and what frameworks do we know that can help us learn and practice compassionate leadership? One model comes from Hougard, Carter and Hobson (2020) which they call a Wise Compassion Leadership Matrix.



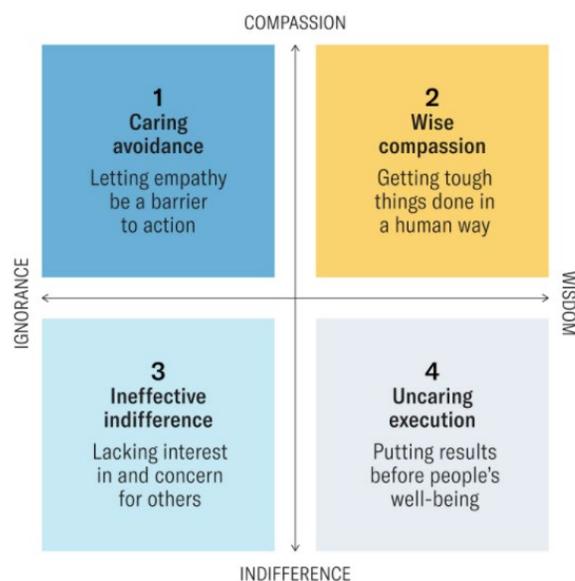
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These researchers call compassion necessary but insufficient, they point to the strength that compassionate leaders have. “Compassion in leadership creates stronger connections between people. It improves collaboration, raises levels of trust, and enhances loyalty. In addition, studies find that compassionate leaders are perceived as stronger and more competent.”

The Wise Compassion Leadership Matrix

Compare this leadership style to three other common ones.



Source: Rasmus Hougaard

HBR

Figure 1

In Figure 1, Hougaard shares the Wise Compassion Leadership Matrix that illustrates how compassion can support or disable effective leadership. The compassion continuum runs from Compassion to Indifference and what they would reference as an action continuum running from Wisdom to Ignorance. In their words, wise compassionate leaders “do hard things in a human way.”

We’ve likely all seen and experienced leadership in each of these quadrants and can recall instances of it in action. Caring leaders who avoided hard work and difficult decisions. Living in quadrant 1 feeling that



the cost of harming a relationship is more important than dealing with troubling circumstances or giving difficult feedback.

Leaders who lack care and commitment to the work and organization live in quadrant 3. Perhaps cynical or exhausted, they really appear to others as disconnected from others and the work. Moving from day to day, going through the motions but not delivering on the necessary leadership work.

Leaders who put power and status at the forefront of their work would reside in quadrant 4. Lacking compassion for others, likely indifferent to the emotional intelligence of the organization or its culture, they are driven by results and execution, but collateral damage abounds. Those who work in organizations led this way are witnessing the potential facilitation of a culture of fear.

Finally, wise compassionate leadership demonstrates care for the individuals, care for the organization, but also delivers on results.

Leading with compassion or using compassion as a tool in the workplace and in relationships is rooted in effective communication which in turn builds trust. When people feel that they are communicated with respectfully, in a caring manner, they feel allegiance to an organization, and they also feel included and supported. Compassionate leadership spreads, and it builds healthy and vibrant workplaces. These places are not without conflict, they do not run as if everyone completely agrees with everything that is going on and every decision, but people feel respected, included, and valued. Part of that feeling is knowing that it's ok to have a different opinion, it's okay to speak up, and it's okay to disagree. At its heart, people care for each other.

We have gone through a period of enormous disruption. Connections have been broken, interactions have been interrupted, people's values and commitment have been tested and tried. It is now time to purposefully rebuild and acting with care and compassion is one way to take our organizations forward, one interaction at a time.

Table Questions:

1. How does the description above resonate with your concepts of compassion and leadership?
2. The Wise Compassion Leadership Matrix – how have you experienced leadership in any of these domains? What was the impact on you and the organization?
3. What specific steps or strategies have you taken, or might you take, to embed compassion into your own practice and in the culture of your organization?



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Further Resources:

Hougaard, R., Carter, J., & Hobson, N. (2020, December). Compassionate Leadership Is Necessary—But Not Sufficient. Harvard Business Review.

<https://hbr.org/2020/12/compassionate-leadership-is-necessary-but-not-sufficient>

Hourgaard, R. (2020, July). Four Reasons Why Compassion is Better for Humanity than Empathy.

Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rasmushougaard/2020/07/08/four-reasons-why-compassion-is-better-for-humanity-than-empathy/?sh=61324099d6f9>

MIT Collaboratives. J-WEL World Education Lab. Compassionate Systems.

<https://jwel.mit.edu/assets/video/compassionate-systems>

MIT Full Steam Ahead. Peter Senge on Compassionate Systems.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kNszsKPIcI>



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