

13 Jul 2020 - Rebecca Peters, Research Advisor

The role of compassion in the workplace

For too long compassion in the workplace has been perceived as an idealistic concept – here’s why it must be the new reality

‘Organisational compassion exists when members of a system collectively notice, feel, and respond to pain experienced by members of that system.’ [Kanov et al. \(2004, p. 810\)](#)

The case for compassion in the workplace – and throughout society as a whole – has grown significantly in recent times. The [coronavirus outbreak](#) has demanded we display greater kindness and empathy towards colleagues, whether on the frontline or working from home. A compassionate approach is vital to remain connected, mentally healthy, and productive while we battle through the challenges we face at work and beyond.

Compassion is also critical in our response to [tackling racism in the workplace](#). Creating inclusive organisational cultures involves connecting with people on a deeper level, listening to and understanding what it means to experience inequality, and taking action in response.

Compassion is the foundation for a humanistic approach in business, correctly placing people front and centre. It involves responding to another’s suffering through positive action and requires interpersonal skills and an individualised approach. Compassion and compassionate leadership have many benefits for individuals and organisations. Yet, the conversation surrounding workplace compassion is still in its infancy, at a time when it has never been more vital.

Compassion in the context of the workplace

Compassion is defined as ‘an empathetic emotional response to another person’s pain or suffering that moves people to act in a way that will either ease the person’s condition or make it more bearable’ [Lilius et al. \(2003, p.4\)](#).

Academic literature suggests that compassion within the context of the workplace is relational and process orientated. [A review of compassion at work](#) noted six key organisational aspects that are relevant to compassion (Dutton, Workman & Hardin

(2014)):

- **Shared values** - a set of values that an organisation and its people perceive to be important.
- **Shared beliefs** - actual organisational beliefs held by employees.
- **Norms** - the normative organisational behaviours that shape how employees act and respond to one another.
- **Organisational practices** - practices which support and shape compassion in the workplace.
- **Structure and quality of relationships** - the quality of human connections between employees, either dyadic or across the organisational network.
- **Leaders' behaviours** - the importance of leaders' actions, specifically the signalling and modelling of appropriate behaviours and response to employees' suffering.

Compassion plays a role at different levels within an organisation. At an organisational level, it requires members of the system to embed compassionate processes to alleviate the suffering and stresses experienced by individuals within that system. This is not restricted to employees alone and includes others such as customers and clients. Leaders and managers must manage and lead with compassion. At an individual level, each member of the organisation must take responsibility to act with empathy and demonstrate support for their colleagues.

Outcomes for compassion

Negative interactions and work environments often result in toxic and bullying workplace cultures. These have adverse outcomes for the organisation and the individual. Positive interpersonal behaviours that take a compassionate approach can minimise negative consequences associated with damaging work environments.

Compassionate workplaces have been positively linked to personal and work-related outcomes, including:

- Positive emotions (at an individual, team and organisational level).
- A decrease in job-related stress and increased affective organisational commitment (positive emotions towards the organisation, linking to organisational behaviours such as turnover intentions) (Lilius et al., 2003).
- Increased psychological wellbeing.
- Outside of workplace settings, significant moderate effects for compassion interventions and decreased depression, anxiety and psychological distress (Kirby, Tellegen & Steindl, 2017).

The positive behaviours and outcomes of compassion support both the business and moral arguments, as well as providing long-term benefits that result from having a

compassion-based culture at work.

Self-compassion

Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion encompasses the idea of directing compassion and kindness towards yourself. According to Neff, this is described as an inward reflection of care and support towards oneself, particularly at a difficult time.

Self-compassion has been found to correlate with wellbeing and positive psychological health (for example, increased happiness and decreased self-criticism ([Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007](#))). It has also been linked to improved sleep and resilience ([Kemper, Mo & Khayat, 2015](#)).

Using evidence-based interventions to increase compassion in the workplace

Previous research has suggested that compassion is a skill that can be developed and learnt through effective interventions and training. According to a review by [Kirby \(2016\)](#) there are six compassion-based interventions with a strong empirical evidence on a range of outcomes:

- Compassion-focused therapy.
- Mindful self-compassion.
- Compassion cultivation training.
- Cognitively-based compassion training.
- Cultivating emotional balance.
- Compassion and loving-kindness meditations.

For a review of each intervention see [Kirby \(2016\)](#).

Compassionate leadership and why it matters

Organisational culture and norms are built by the people working within them and it's our duty as employers, leaders and individuals, to bring compassion into the workplace. Good work is built on organisational systems where employees feel supported and valued. In an ideal world, employees should feel comfortable to share their voice on workplace ideas and issues and able to build strong trusting relationships with colleagues. However, the reality is that compassionate leadership is still some way off.

[Research in 2019 by Businessolver](#) found that while 92% of CEOs perceived their organisations as empathetic, only 72% of employees said they worked for an empathetic employer. Additionally, 58% of CEOs reported difficulty in consistently exhibiting empathy in the workplace. This suggests there is a deficiency in the number of senior leaders who

value a culture of empathy and compassion. To make progress in this area, leaders must set expectations and role model the organisation's culture, setting a clear standard for the way we treat our colleagues in the workplace. Compassion should start from the top.

Building compassionate leadership

Developed from a review of evidence and a survey with over 500 employees and managers, [Roffey Park's Compassion at Work Index](#) provides a model which captures five key attributes required for compassion in the workplace:

- Being alive to the suffering of others.
- Being non-judgmental.
- Tolerating personal distress.
- Being empathic.
- Taking appropriate action.

Building upon this, being a compassionate leader means encouraging and influencing care and compassion throughout the wider business. This needs to start with the overriding culture - compassionate behaviour must be recognised as the norm and not just 'nice to have'. The Compassion at Work Index also includes reflective questions for leaders to identify actions and activities which create compassionate workplaces. You can complete the index to gather an indication of your personal level of compassion at work measured across the five attributes mentioned above.

Given the turbulent times, there has never been a better moment to consider compassion within your business. How compassionate do you think your organisation is? Do your people team and leaders demonstrate compassionate behaviours at work? Do you as an individual offer compassion to your colleagues and to yourself? Remember, compassion is a skill that can be developed – we can all be kinder, more considerate and supportive.

Further resources:

[Affinity work health and wellbeing hub: Compassion in the workplace](#)

Lilius, J.M., Kanov, J., Dutton, J.E., Worline, M.C., and Maitlis, S. (2013). [Compassion revealed](#). Centre for Positive Organizational Scholarship, Michigan Ross School of Business.

Poorkavoos, M. (2016) [Compassionate leadership: what is it and why do organisations need more of it?](#) Roffey Park.

[Roffey Park Compassion at Work Index](#)
