



The Whole Patient

- THE WHOLE PATIENT, *F. BOLIN*
- THE PATIENT, THE WHOLE PATIENT AND NOTHING BUT THE PATIENT, *B. MCLEOD-SMITH*
- THE WHOLE PATIENT? THE WHOLE PERSON, *B. S. JOSE*
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Compassion

The human dimension of productivity

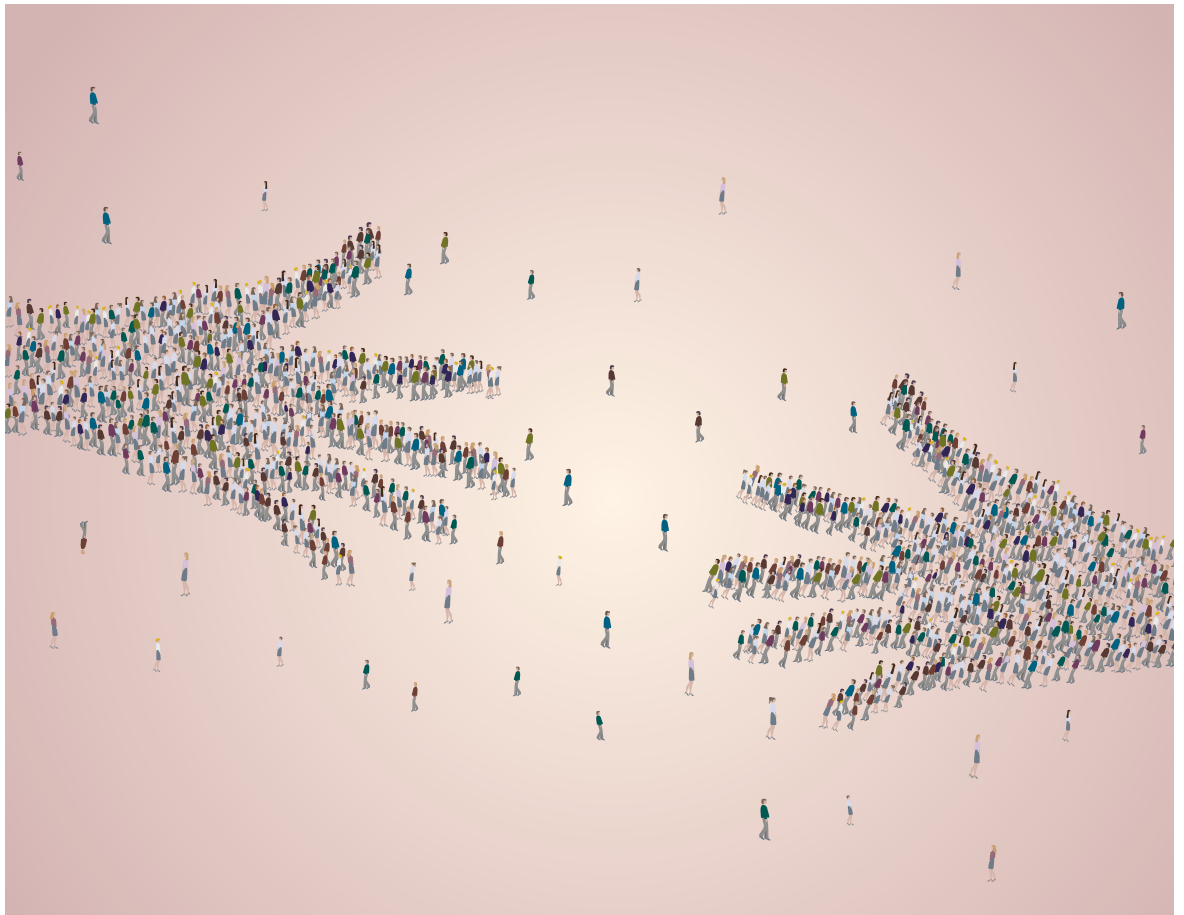
Findings from recent studies on compassion in the workplace, the business case for compassion and some practical tips on how to create a more compassionate workplace.



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If you work in the healthcare sector, you agree that compassion is fundamental to patient care. The majority of the people in healthcare work hard to offer compassionate care to their patients. Mid-Staffordshire Hospital in the UK is just one example where a lack of compassion led to people experiencing serious failings in basic standards of care, which led to suffering and avoidable deaths.

Think about doctors, nurses and all the other people who work directly or indirectly with patients. Do they all need compassion? Would they be able to offer the care that every patient deserves in a workplace that lacks compassion? First, let's find

out more about what compassion in the workplace looks like and then look at how compassionate workplaces might impact on staff, patients and the overall organisation.

What is compassion?

Dictionaries define compassion as feeling pity, mercy and sympathy. But being compassionate is far more than feeling sympathetic or being kind to someone. I define compassion as being moved by and feeling sorrow for another person's suffering and taking action to alleviate the pain felt by that person. Put simply, compassion is taking action to alleviate the



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sufferer's pain. In my opinion, taking action is the most important part of compassion and a key differentiator of a compassionate person from the rest.

Through my research I have identified five characteristics of a compassionate person in the work environment. The five characteristics are:

Being alive to the suffering of others

Being sensitive to the wellbeing of others and noticing any change in their behaviour is one of the important attributes of a compassionate person. It enables the compassionate person to notice when others need help. Noticing someone's suffering could be difficult, particularly in workplaces where people are busy with their work and preoccupied with their deadlines. Also, depending on the work environment and the culture of the organisation, people may tend to hide their pain from others.

Being non-judgmental

A compassionate person does not judge the sufferer and accepts and validates the person's experience. He or she recognises that the experience of a single individual is part of the larger human experience and it is not a separate event only happening to this person. Judging people in difficulty—or worse, condemning them—is one of the obstacles that prevents us from understanding their situation and thereby being able to feel their pain.

Tolerating personal distress

Distress tolerance is the ability to bear or to hold difficult emotions. Hearing about or becoming aware of someone's difficulty may distress a compassionate person but does not overwhelm that person to the extent that it stops them from taking action. People who feel overwhelmed by another person's distress may simply turn away and may not be able to help or take the right action.

Being empathetic

Feeling the emotional pain of the person who is suffering is another attribute of a compassionate person. Empathy involves understanding the sufferer's pain and feeling it as if it were one's own.

Taking appropriate action

Feeling empathic towards someone encourages the observer to take action and to do something to help the sufferer. Customising actions depending on the sufferer's personal circumstances is also important.

Taking the right action depends on the extent to which we have made efforts to know the sufferer.

The business case for compassion in the workplace

Over the past few years of working on this topic, I have found substantial evidence to support the hypothesis that compassion in the work environment improves staff wellbeing and positively impacts the bottom line.

There is strong scientific evidence for the link between stress and illness. Selye (1950) was one of the pioneers in this field of study who found that stress compromises the body's immune system. Another study by McEven and Stellar (1993) shows that stress can compromise the immune system so severely that it raises blood pressure, weakens resistance to viral infections (think about this and working in a hospital), increases the risk of heart attacks and speeds up the spread of cancer.

“ COMPASSION IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT IMPROVES STAFF WELLBEING AND POSITIVELY IMPACTS THE BOTTOM LINE ”

In an interesting experiment (published in the *Journal of Advancement in Medicine*, 1995) researchers demonstrated just how long the effects of stress can remain in the body. The experiment involved two groups of healthy volunteers, one of which was asked to spend five minutes thinking about an experience that made them angry; the other group were asked to think about an experience of care and compassion. Researchers then measured their IgA (a key immune system antibody which helps the body resist invading bacteria and viruses). For participants in the first group (the ones remembering a situation that made them angry or frustrated), IgA level increased briefly and then dropped substantially and stayed low for five hours. The IgA level of participants in the second group (the ones focused on caring and compassionate feelings) rose and stayed at a high level for six hours.

This study suggests that simply remembering an emotion can have a significant impact on our immune system. Now imagine experiencing those negative emotions on a daily basis and their impact on our bodies. Based on these studies,

the link between compassionate workplaces and staff wellbeing is self-explanatory. A compassionate workplace in which people feel safe to share their problems and seek help will help to reduce the level of stress and consequently improve the overall level of staff wellbeing. In a recent survey conducted by Roffey Park, 83% of respondents (out of 500 respondents) said they have been managed by someone who in their view lacked compassion. I asked each of them how their manager's lack of compassion impacted on them and their colleagues. They said it increased their level of stress and anxiety, made them feel demotivated and disengaged, and made them leave the organisation. They also said it created a culture of distrust, fear, poor performance and dysfunctional teams.

Studies also show that compassion in the workplace can impact the bottom line. I have summarised some of those studies here:

- Those working in care-giving organisations that are compassionate are more likely to have the emotional resources needed for caring and are less likely to experience burnout (Figley 1995; Lilius et al. 2011)
- Compassion breeds compassion—those who experience it are more likely to demonstrate it towards others (Goetz et al. 2010)
- Supervisors who perceive that their organisation values their wellbeing are more likely to show supportive behaviour towards the people they manage (Shanock and Eisenberger 2006)
- Not only do people who receive compassion benefit from it, but the person demonstrating compassion also benefits, as do colleagues who witness compassionate acts. This leads to relationships which are stronger and more positive, and therefore more collaboration in the workplace. (Dunn et al. 2008). It also reduces employee turnover and increases organisational citizenship (Lilius et al. 2011; Fryer 2013)
- Compassion can help to grow trust between individuals and creates psychological safety (Worline and Dutton 2017). This can create a willingness to discuss and learn from errors and failures, which can result in more innovation.

How do you create a compassionate organisation?

Creating a compassionate organisation is as much

about focusing on individuals (both self and others) as it is about focusing on the organisation as a whole. To answer the question of how to create a compassionate organisation, I have brought together recommendations from previous studies and my own research. I have identified three steps to building a compassionate organisation:

1-Self-compassion

The first step is to be compassionate towards yourself. Self-compassion is about understanding your thoughts and feelings as they arise and avoiding pushing them away. It is about giving yourself time and space to recover from those feelings. Self-compassion is similar to compassion towards others; it is about understanding and acknowledging your feelings and being kind to yourself (non-judgmental). It is also about avoiding self-pity and being resilient so that you take appropriate action. Taking appropriate action could involve encouraging gentle change where needed and adjusting patterns of behaviour to avoid similar situations.

2-Compassion toward others

The next step is about being a compassionate colleague. Compassion is about understanding colleagues' pain and problems and taking action to lessen their suffering. Remember those five attributes I mentioned earlier in the article. You can also go to www.roffeypark.com/cwi and complete the Compassion at Work Index (CWI) questionnaire to find out your own level of compassion. The CWI provides a personalised report of how you see your own level of compassion at work across the five attributes as well as practical tips to improve or enhance your approach.

“COMPASSION IS TAKING ACTION TO ALLEVIATE THE SUFFERER'S PAIN”

3-Fostering a culture of compassion

The third step is creating a culture of compassion in the organisation. In such a culture, people trust each other and feel it is acceptable to talk about their problems and seek help and support from their colleagues or the organisation.

As a leader you can foster a compassionate culture through:

- Role-modelling compassion by showing compassion towards colleagues and encouraging team members to do the same
- Celebrating, recognising and rewarding compassionate actions
- Encouraging people to share their personal stories of compassion at work to increase empathy and share ideas on how to enhance your organisations' compassion capabilities.
- Promoting healthy practices at work; for example, making time for individual one-to-ones
- Actively encouraging and empowering others to respond to a colleague's suffering
- Making sure that there is a strong connection between people in your team which makes them feel joined, seen, felt, known and not alone
- Creating a safe environment for your team members to share their personal problems, issues and challenges.

Activities at an organisational level that foster a compassionate culture include:

- Providing coaching support to leaders so that they model cultural values that support compassion
- Embedding compassion into company values.
- Raising awareness about compassion through compassion training and sharing stories of compassionate decisions, or lack of them, and their consequences
- Redesigning recruitment processes to emphasise compassion, high quality connection and empathy, and which fit cultural values of shared humanity at work
- Creating opportunities to bring people together

regularly and enable personal connections to be made

- Designing policies and procedures to give people guidelines on what support mechanisms are available in the organisation. Any policies need to be flexible so they can be adapted depending on people's personal circumstances.

Concluding remarks:

I recognise that creating compassionate workplaces is not an easy task and may require a complete cultural shift. However, I hope that the business case I have offered here will encourage you to take up this journey. The three steps I have suggested are a good starting point to introduce compassion in our workplaces and eventually build compassionate organisations. ■

KEY POINTS



- ✓ Studies show that compassion, amongst other things, can improve staff health and wellbeing, improve retention, increase engagement, encourage innovation and ultimately improve productivity within organisations.
- ✓ The five attributes of a compassionate person in the workplace are: being alive to the suffering of others, being non-judgmental, tolerating personal resilience, being empathetic and taking appropriate action.
- ✓ Compassion can create a willingness to discuss and learn from errors and failures, helping to reduce defensiveness, achieve successful double-loop learning and improve problem solving.
- ✓ A good starting point to encourage more compassion in your workplace is to be compassionate towards yourself. Next is to be a compassionate colleague and last is to encourage a culture of compassion in the organisation.



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