COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP: A MODEL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role and potential of compassionate leadership in creating organizational well-being. The concept of compassion is challenging to investigate from an organizational perspective due to the contextual nature of perceived meaning. However, this paper suggests that compassionate leadership can contribute to long-term sustainability and well-being in organizations, and provides a theoretical model of how these virtues can be applied in organizations. It takes an interdisciplinary outlook and borrows terms from Buddhist philosophy to develop a richer more inclusive discourse to facilitate the bridging between disparate theories. It takes an interpretive phenomenological approach to holistically review and integrate research associated with creating common good in organizations through spirituality, positivity, community and ethics. The paper will focus on the role and application of compassion in the workplace from a leadership and employee perspective and suggest a framework for the application of compassion in the workplace along with a practical guideline for leaders to follow and a conceptual framework for both normative and pragmatic functions. The compassionate leadership model envisions a more inclusive workplace that moves humanity beyond the narrow conventional organizational paradigm dominated by self-interest.
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**Introduction**

Compassion in the workplace is a growing concern in light of increasing evidence of unethical practices in the business world. Until recently, scholarship on organizational life focused primarily on productivity, informational flow and decision making, but scholars are considering alternative approaches to the contemporary workplace that are more inclusive of social identity and emotional well-being. There is a correlation between the experience of compassion at work and the incentive to feel committed to an organization. Compassionate responses take a wide range of forms, such as gestures of emotional support, giving material goods, providing work flexibility, talking, listening, and expressing concern or empathy. Emotional well-being in the workplace builds people’s intellectual, physical, social and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2003). Compassion is positively related to dedication, work engagement and job performance and negatively related to turnover and absenteeism (Dane & Brummel, 2013). According to research, compassionate organizations have more employee loyalty and engagement.

Psychologically painful interactions have significant effects on organizations and according to the Grief Recovery Institute, in the United States results in more than $75 billion annually in costs arising from employees’ grief related incidents (Zaslow, 2002). Suffering is the experience of existential anguish and is an inevitable part of organizational life. Suffering may be the result of illness or the loss of a loved one, but suffering can also arise within an organization due to toxic relationships with management and colleagues. Regardless of whether suffering is work or non-work related, compassion could help balance work conflicts and personal struggles. Compassion also strengthens commitment to an organization by fostering a sense of being cared for and valued, which encourages the incorporation of membership into an employee’s self-identity (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

**Conventional organizational theory**

An organization is a complex social structure that connects people’s personal and professional interests within a common organizational affiliation. The aggregation of personal interests and shared goals defines an organization, and in order to achieve a common purpose, individuals need to fulfill different roles (Madden, 2012). Conventional organizational theory conceptualizes systems that are functionally driven with little consideration for the people who implement those functions (Frost, 1999).
organizational theory neglects the humanity of organizational life, and as a result of some inaccurate fundamental assumptions, fails to illuminate the complexity of the workplace. Specifically, many theories do not account for suffering or the need for self-respect and dignity in the workplace, and as a result distort our understanding of organizational life. Conventional organizational theory systematizes, rationalizes, routinizes and bureaucratizes human actions in an attempt to strip away and control human emotions that may interfere with rationality (Dummel, et al., 2006). The current inflexible organizational structure, which has dominated for more than two hundred years, is on the verge of collapse and needs to be restructured (Beal, 2010).

There is increasing insecurity and uncertainty in today's workplace. Economic pressure, competition, global interdependence and heightened volatility have led to downsizing and exacerbated work related stress. Loyalty, commitment and experience no longer ensure job security, so leaders today are faced with the additional challenge of managing employees who are mistrustful, cynical and habituated to toxic encounters with management. These pressures negatively impact employees' experiences and expectations. In order to address these unique twenty-first century business realities, organizations need to create workplaces that empower employees, build trust and develop a sense of community.

**Transformative organizational theory**

Organizations have followed a model that measures success on the basis of profitability, which inadequately recognizes the resources people create. Moving away from ego-driven, top down management style is critical for organizations to grow, attract competent employees, increase engagement and build loyalty and trust. Due to the perceived authority of managers, transformational change is more impactful when generated by people in leadership positions. Once initiated, employees will begin to feel safe to participate in the process. For an organization to change, it needs to redefine how information flows between people and the system: attention and positive feedback must come from more than just a few people in senior positions.

Many academic studies support the view that compassionate leadership in the workplace has a positive transformative effect on organizational life. Recently there has been an explosion in organizational research and literature calling attention to issues of compassion
and care in organizations (Karakas & Sarigollo, 2013). Organizational response to suffering recognizes pain as a legitimate part of organizational life (Dummel, et al., 2006). There is a need to create a compassionate organization where employees feel courageous and empowered. People who experience positive emotions are more engaged and less likely to experience burnout or participate in counterproductive behaviour (Rynes, et al., 2012). Positivity benefits organizations because it leads to higher levels of motivation, performance and commitment.

A compassionate workplace

In many organizations today, psychological disengagement, layoffs, downsizing, corruption, organizational bullying and mistreatment have led to a crisis in confidence and profound distrust in management. Leadership in most organizations is chronically lacking and fails to adequately respond to these problems. Employees deal with toxic decisions and negative emotions that result from interactions with colleagues and managers, so today’s leaders encounter people who are fearful, sceptical and disengaged. Professional and academic literature is replete with examples of leaders who act selfishly, abuse power, use intimidation and fear to motivate people, find fault and blame others for mistakes, take credit for the work of others and micro-manage. When organizations succumb to toxic leadership and the competencies of compassion are absent, organizational life suffers (Frost, 1999). Leaders who aim for external goals (money, power, status) will falter, but leaders who understand the hierarchy of needs will respond and succeed (Chopra, 2010).

The alignment of an organization depends on the participation of its members, yet many organizations continue to rely on top down directives that disempower employees and limit possibility. A positive workplace needs to be reinforced by the actions of the management team who serve as ethical role models. According to Karakas and Sarigollo (2013), “top managers shape culture through their words and deeds” (p. 675). Leaders with higher ethical sensitivity evoke virtuous behaviour in organizations. A compassionate leader initiates a cycle of positive change through 1) ethical decision-making 2) creating meaning and 3) inspiring hope and fostering courage for action that leaves a positive impact on the community (Karakas & Sarigollo, 2013). Genuine and intentional actions motivated by kindness result in shared benefits for the common good. Compassionate leaders nourish membership and use intentional attributes of love to enhance inclusion. They are moved by
suffering and motivated by altruism to serve as a shining light to others (Grant, 2008). They give up their own goals in exchange for group decisions, do not need to know all the answers or be superior, and they listen instead of talk. Selfless leaders build relationships and respond to others to inspire higher levels of performance and purpose in their lives.

How do leaders become compassionate?

At some point in their lives many leaders have been affected by a personal crisis or tragedy that triggers a state of disequilibrium from which the capacity for compassion emerges (Madden, 2012). According to Grant, (2008) “this personal transformation experienced by a leader is called a metanoia: the word metanoia literally means transcendence of the mind” (p.77). Prior to metanoia transformation, leaders are motivated by self-interest and are less sensitive to their relationships with others (Grant, 2008). As a result of their own trauma, they become better equipped to respond to suffering and provide sacrificial services to make life safer for others. Compassionate leadership requires what Grant (2008) terms “agapao” - love in a social and moral sense, which allows the leader to view each member of the organization “as a complete person who has wants, needs, and desires” (p.79). Agapao love in an organization results in people being treated as ‘hired hearts’ as opposed to ‘hired hands’ (Grant, 2008). Acts of compassion require opening one’s heart and allowing one’s self to feel the emotional needs of others.

The road to becoming a compassionate leader requires self-reflection and personal transformation. Leaders who can evaluate their own strengths and weakness are better equipped to recognize and utilize the talents of others. They embrace employees as whole persons, discover human potential, create supportive teams, encourage positive engagement, and foster organizational growth and ethical membership in the community. There is a strong connection between compassionate leaders and ethical organizations: compassionate leaders act as catalysts. A compassionate leader knows that to lead others she must be genuine and know her own heart. This requires 1) attention to the demands of ego; 2) recognition that the ego is a barrier to the deeper self; and, 3) courage to understand that without knowing oneself, one cannot attract respect, allegiance and the trust needed to guide others (Beal, 2010, p. 209). The key to progress and positive change is the constant search for a more benevolent and transcendent self because there is a contagious nature to positive engagement at the organizational level (Karakas & Sarigollo, 2013, p. 671). When
individuals reflect on their own shortcomings, they not only strive to improve themselves, but also begin to see potential, rather than fault in others and this initiates the cycle of positive change.

**What are the qualities of a compassionate leader?**

Compassion allows leaders to access their emotions as well as their intellect, and by doing so to increase their ability to respond effectively. Compassionate leaders engage in connective conversations with others, use positive emotions to motivate, discard outdated or dissonant rules for the greater good, put other’s needs before their own, are mindful of the impact of their own behaviour, speak candidly, listen deeply, build trust, and are approachable. Compassionate leaders celebrate the accomplishments of others and do not dwell on problems. They encourage forgiveness and view mistakes as learning opportunities. They demonstrate trustworthiness and build positive relationships based on respect and appreciation. They ask for opinions and listen to the contributions of others. They share information and help employees to collaboratively problem solve in order to come up with positive solutions. They allocate tasks designed to fit people’s strengths and give them the autonomy to experience achievement.

Compassionate leaders are moral and conduct their personal lives ethically, they make fair decisions and can be trusted. They are responsible for their decisions and are conscious of their role in any situation. Their demonstration of desirable qualities directly influences how employees conduct themselves. One of the key ways people learn is through mimicry. Employees frequently model their behaviour according to the behaviour they see in others. Empirical evidence supports that when employees observe positive engagement they are likely to replicate the behaviour, be more inclined to help colleagues and feel committed to their work (Karakas & Sarigollo, 2013, p. 671). Ethical behaviour positively impacts organizational performance and encourages “positives spirals of reciprocal behaviour” and protects the organization in times of stress (Madden, 2012, p. 691). This cycle of positivity demonstrates that when leaders are responsive and engaged, the entire organization becomes more ethical and collectively flourishes.
How to create a compassionate workplace?
In order for the capacity of compassion to emerge at an organizational level, policies and initiatives need to be put in place to encourage compassionate responses to employees’ emotional needs. Despite challenges in finding convergence across complex behavioural models, there is a growing interest both conceptually and empirically in how compassion can provide an account of organizational behaviour more accurate than conventional mechanistic models (Madden, et al., 2012). Management theory identifies compassion as a deep concern with the well-being of others that considers a person’s whole life (Karakas & Sarigollo, 2013). Compassionate organizing happens when individuals in an organization react and respond to human suffering in a coordinated way. Compassion is conceptualized as a form of emotional work and is developed through the theoretical model of noticing, feeling and responding (Miller, 2007). Noticing involves recognizing the needs of others, the process of feeling involves connecting empathetically, and responding involves verbal strategies and environmental structuring to balance emotional and informational content.

How can organizations support compassionate leadership?
While there is no simple formula, which will ensure compassionate leadership within organizations, there are some general guidelines. Organizations should recruit ethical applicants, follow written policies or codes that enforce ethical practices and protect employees from violations of ethical misconduct, ensure that new employees receive orientation specifically related to behaviour expectations, provide positive feedback and acknowledge moral decisions, hold employees accountable for their actions and discipline employees who violate ethical standards. Organizations should articulate an Organizational Vision, which states core values and ethical standards. They should also issue ethical practices assessments to employees so that they may have the opportunity to give feedback. Organizations should provide professional development and training to enable employees to develop their skills. In order to affect positive change in organizational life leaders should encourage open, participative and adaptive learning systems (Grant, 2008). Compassionate leaders facilitate positivity by modeling ethical behaviour and contributing to the common good. In some organizational contexts, it may be appropriate to integrate a spiritual dimension into the workplace. Some of the nontheistic notions of Buddhism may provide organizations with some general guidelines to create more compassionate environments.
**Buddhist compassion**

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism address: 1) the nature of suffering (Dukkha); 2) the origin of suffering (Samudya); 3) the cessation of suffering (Nirodha); and, 4) the way leading to the end of suffering (Magga) (Marques, 2011, p. 565). The three part process of Buddhist compassion involves empathically noticing another person’s suffering, feeling empathy for the perceived feelings of others, and responding in a way that eases suffering (Dummel, et al., 2006). The Buddhist concept of compassion provides leaders with a systematic method to respond to suffering. According to Buddhist psychology, compassion is natural and is derived from our interdependence (Kornfield, 2008, p. 25). The process of noticing, feeling and responding to other’s needs set a pattern for positive collective action. The experience of positive emotions in the workplace has been shown to lead to greater affective commitment to the organization by encouraging employees to incorporate membership into their self-identity (Lilius, et al., 2008).

**A spiritual dimension in the workplace**

The Buddhist tradition is thousands of years old and extends beyond any modern organizational theory. The Buddhist concept of compassion, which aims to remove the suffering attached to self-centered desires, such as ambition and attachment to material objects, is oddly juxtaposed to the materiality of contemporary organizations. However, research investigating Buddhist constructs from a workplace perspective is burgeoning and the Buddhist concepts of compassion and mindfulness are being integrated into contemporary leadership scholarship. Buddhism is a value-based, scientific educational system that encourages individuals to discover their true nature and attain happiness, not only for themselves, but also for all sentient beings (Marques, 2010). Buddhist practices may be applicable to today’s workplace as a means to ensure commitment, enhance performance and create healthier more sustainable organizations. Some of the key concepts of Buddhist philosophy that can be applied in the workplace include impermanence, karma, non-harming (ahimsa), ethics, kindness, compassion, mindfulness, charity, collaboration, and right livelihood.

Impermanence is the concept that enlightened minds view all phenomenon as impermanent in nature. A mind conditioned to impermanence realizes that all things change; therefore, attachment to materiality only leads to suffering. This is useful in the workplace in that it
helps people to realize that titles, personnel shifts and expectations fluctuate. Karma is the law of interdependent causation, which states that when we harm others we bring negativity into our own lives. It is quite simply the golden rule that suggests, “Do unto others as you would want others to do unto you” and may help employees consider the ramifications of unethical behaviour. In today’s workplace there is often excessive gossip and backstabbing perpetrated by people who fear for their positions. The practice of non-harming (ahimsa) is critical for leaders to consider the long-term effects of their behavior on organizational sustainability. According to the Dalai Lama, ethics refers to acts that guide our body, speech and mind, helping us stay away from indulging in unwholesome activities (Marques, 2011, p. 29). Although ethics is not specifically Buddhist based, it is critical that organizations address issues of misconduct associated with morality. The Buddhist value of loving-kindness decrees that a tender and merciful heart alleviates suffering in the world. In the workplace compassion enhances relationships, benefits the well-being of the organization and leads to greater collaboration (Marques, 2011).

Mindfulness is key to Buddhist teaching and asserts that meditation calms our evaluative, analytical and judgmental thoughts. Mindfulness is a state of acute awareness that minimizes the harmful effects of ego. In the workplace mindfulness has many advantages, such as increased concentration and the ability to remain calm and make meaningful connections. Mindful conversation requires being aware of the effects our words have on others. One of the key tenets of Buddhism’s Noble Eightfold Path is wise speech, which posits that one should say only what is true, beneficial and expressed without malice (Hanson, 2009). While it takes effort to speak your own truth rather than try to change other people’s opinions, effective communication is particularly important in creating a compassionate workplace. Loving speech shows understanding and inspires confidence both in the self and in the organization. Mindfulness is desirable in a workplace setting because it enhances judgment accuracy, cognitive flexibility, and insight related problem solving (Dane & Brummel, 2013, p. 105). The practice of mindfulness can give rise to greater empathy for oneself and others, increase energy and wellbeing, help access ethical instincts, improve relationships and remind us what is important in life (Dhiman, 2009).

The Buddha spoke of right livelihood and how to produce wellbeing, not only for us, but also for all those affected by our work. The way you work contributes to a collective
awakening of others and society as a whole (Hhat Hanh, 2010). Right livelihood promotes the idea that we should engage in work that is non-harmful. According to the Dhammapada, right livelihood requires “being in tune with increasing helpfulness for all beings and decreasing harm” (Surya Das, 1997, p. 231). Our work should not adversely affect our health or relationships with any other living beings. Interconnectedness is an awareness that helps lead people towards altruism and to cope with the increasing diversity in today’s workplace. Nurturing interdependence helps employees be more respectful and collaborative and decreases discrimination.

Leaders who embody compassion create a more humane workplace that allows for self-expression and interconnectedness. A spiritual organization incorporates altruistic love “a sense of wholeness, harmony, and well-being produced through care, concern and appreciation for both self and others” (Grant, 2008, p. 78). Buddhist practices can have a powerful transformative influence in today’s workplace. Marques (2013) speculates that the adaptability of Buddhism makes it an appropriate form of spirituality to introduce into the workplace. A spiritual leader can introduce secular mindfulness and contribute to the collective energy of compassion. According to the Dalai Lama, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion” (Dalai Lama, 2012, p. 43). Central to the goal of Buddhist compassion is to remove suffering (dukkah) and the suffering that arises from selfish desires and attachments. Today’s employees often feel psychological isolation and anxiety at work, but experiencing compassion can alleviate suffering and increase interconnectedness.

**The cause of suffering in the workplace**

The workplace is often fraught with anxiety, egos competing for validation, leaders disempowering employees, co-workers sabotaging one another and underlining job insecurity. Members of an organization are vulnerable to the effects of change and the ever-increasing competitive business environment creates stress, mistrust and alienation. Uncertainty and powerlessness lead to a host of dysfunctional behaviour such as gossip, manipulation, and backstabbing. Compassionate leadership reduces the psychological and physiological effects of stress associated with negative workplaces and increases organizational well-being.
The first step in transforming a competitive workplace is for leaders to see beyond the hierarchy and enable employees to participate in meaningful ways. Egotistical leaders motivated by personal agendas severely limit the potential in others and cause suffering. The Buddha is reported to have said, “suffering is optional but an inevitable part of the human condition” (Frost, 1999, p. 128). If suffering is an inevitable part of the human condition, it should be considered a significant aspect of organizational life. When we experience anxiety or fear our neurons are flooded with electrical signals and our mental capacities break down. This adversely affects employees’ ability to do their work. Therefore any strategy that reduces suffering can be said to increase positivity and should be considered an integral part of an effective organization.

**The benefits of positive emotions in the workplace**

Research shows that positive emotions are interrelated to motivation, physical health, resilience and enhanced job performance. Dissonance and toxic relationships adversely affect the psychological and physiological well-being of employees. Chronic stress increases the possibility of autoimmune disorders. Many diseases are associated with the activation of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). On the other hand, care arouses the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS), which lowers blood pressure, enhances immunity and leads to overall better health (Boyatzis, et al., 2006). Caring for others sustains compassion in a leader, releases oxytocin and increases parasympathetic activity. This physiological effect enables sustained leadership effectiveness by allowing leaders to maintain a healthy state and elicits more cognitive abilities (Boyatzis, et al., 2006). Emotion associated with the experience of compassion reduces anxiety, sadness, feelings of shame and fear and increases positive emotions such as pride, gratitude, inspiration and ease (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). When people have higher levels of positivity and feel secure, they are open and think in more divergent ways; they are more effective and make more accurate decisions.

Mindfulness and meditation have demonstrable effects on the brain and immune function, reduce stress, and improve relationships (Dhiman, 2009). Mindfulness leads to wisdom and the best way to increase mindfulness is through meditation. Mindfulness is positively related to vitality, life satisfaction, and interpersonal relationship quality and negatively related to stress, depression, and anxiety (Dane & Brummel, 2013). An individual engaged
in practices such as mindfulness and meditation suffers less stress and experiences better health (Marques, 2010). Companies in the United States lose an estimated $300 billion annually due to lost productivity, absenteeism, and health costs related to stress, so the incorporation of mindfulness in the workplace is much more than an extension of good will or personal interest (Dhiman, 2009, p.72). Positive people are healthier, sleep better and experience less pain, which is clearly better for an organization as it improves productivity and reduces healthcare costs. A compassionate leader model satisfies spiritual needs in the workplace and positively influences psychological and physiological health by reducing stress.

**Compassion extends beyond the workplace**

Compassionate leadership influences the wider community through positive social modeling. Positive employees are more effective interpersonally and have more close relationships so they can cooperate and avoid conflict. In a compassionate workplace people become more confident in their autonomy to make decisions, they feel connected to others and respond to situations confidently. Compassion is an important factor in teaching us to identify and interact with people who may not otherwise be in our lives. Sometimes this requires accepting idiosyncrasies and imperfections, but in a safe environment people can open up and trust that they will not be persecuted. Many organizations today are emotionally sterile and discourage deep connections. People fear that opening up to management may expose failures and such expressions of insecurities may result in loss of respect or termination. A lack of compassionate responsiveness jeopardizes social cohesion. When the distinction between life, work and relationships is integrated, employees feel authentically connected to their careers and their community. Leaders focused on positivity demonstrate social commitment that transcends the purely economic or productive aspects organizations by addressing quality of life.

**Conclusion**

Organizational life is increasingly fluid and uncertain. A mechanistic worldview assumes that leaders can depend upon planning and articulating control over mechanisms to bring about desired outcomes; however, researchers are discovering that organizations are increasingly unknowable (Madden, 2012). In light of these uncertainties, organizations need to provide a positive workplace to attract and retain talented employees. Research shows
that employees who experience positive emotions make better decisions, are more creative, productive, and resilient, and have better interpersonal skills (Rynes, et al., 2012). The compassionate leadership model encourages collective capabilities and promotes both organizational and personal goals. It is based on the mounting evidence that compassionate leaders build more cohesive and effective communities within the workplace, which positively affects organizational well-being.

A compassionate leadership model proposes that leaders incorporate a spiritual component in order to make work meaningful, apply ethical sensitivity, model right conduct and positive behaviour, support engagement that encourages participation, inspire commitment, and foster a sense of community to shape a better organizational life. Integrating spirituality requires a delicate balance: too little meaning leads to apathy, but in today’s secular workplace too much spirituality may further alienate some employees. Ethical responsiveness must not be so high as to create a judgmental and rigid atmosphere. Similarly an excessive emphasis on engagement could lead to competitiveness. If the transformational process is not mindfully implemented, compassionate leaders may become excessively tolerant of poor performance and inadvertently cause harm.

Organizations should institute ethical policies that encourage positive social initiatives. Comprehensive guidelines would help leaders to explore and evaluate their own methods and provide practical recommendations for leaders to create a compassionate workplace. Organizations should provide leadership development training that advocates a compassionate leadership perspective; promote the practices of leaders who have succeeded in creating positive change; and recruit ethical individuals.

There are still gaps in the research and more inquiry is required to empirically link compassionate leadership to the cycle of positive organizational change. Further research in the field of compassionate leadership needs to investigate the role of compassionate leaders in creating ethical organizations. The compassionate leadership model needs to be differentiated from other transformative leadership styles and future research needs to address how these models are interrelated and may be adapted for different organizational contexts.
This paper proposes a theoretical model of compassionate leadership which links spirituality, community, morality and positivity and illustrates how these virtues contribute to ethical organizational life. Building a compassionate workplace does not require a costly investment; all that is needed are committed leaders willing to participate in positive change. Compassionate leadership encourages the implementation of supportive mentoring, peer review, on-job training, positive role modeling and consciousness raising conversations that encourage critical self-reflection. The compassionate leadership model provides a holistic basis for creating organizational wellbeing.

May you be happy
May you be healthy
May you be safe
May you live with ease
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