

Compassionate Leadership in the 21st Century

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Professor Michael West, Compassionate Leadership

In a world grappling with complex challenges, changes and uncertainties, people need leaders with skills, mindsets and behaviours unlike any generation of leaders before.

The latest Trust Barometer from Edelman sees trust continue to decline in media and government. Business is still the only trusted institution. But it’s not a given, and employees have criteria they expect businesses to meet for trust to be in place. David MacLeod OBE, founder of Engage for Success, sums it up best when he says:

“Trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback.”

**WE
SWIM AGAINST
THE TIDE**

The pandemic changed the game for work, forever. We became accustomed to our leaders displaying (either willingly or kicking and screaming) a level of authenticity like never before. Unscripted and often from their own kitchen tables, pets and offspring in the background, leaders needed to show empathy and compassion as the days, weeks and months unfolded. Employees have grown used to this new norm and their expectations have changed for good – we can't go back now. Workers expect work to be different; better. The onus is on leaders to not only create the right cultures for their people to stay and thrive, but to fill the wider leadership void left by previously trusted sources and figures.

As Gen Z start to enter the workplace in increasing numbers, they are leading the push for more meaning at work. They look to their leaders to provide this, in purpose-driven organisations who demonstrably care about wider societal issues. For example, they are more likely to work for a company if it were to publicly support and demonstrate commitment to issues such as human rights, climate change and racial justice¹.

And it isn't just employees seeking change. The impact of Elon Musk's involvement with the US Government on Tesla's share price and global drop in sales demonstrate that customer and investors look to leaders for more than just good commercial stewardship. They expect values and behaviour they can trust, that match their own, and that show compassion in action.

Wellbeing needs to be front and centre, and that takes compassion from the top. Figures from a recent study by the CIPD into workplace absence report that in the UK we are taking more sick days than ever before.

The data reveals the increasing impact of mental health in the workplace. 63% of organisations asked to contribute to the study listed mental health in their top three reasons for illness lasting longer than a month². On the back of this the CIPD urges organisations to create a supportive culture where employees can discuss health issues and access support.

¹ Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report Trust in Work 2023

² CIPD 'Health and wellbeing at work' November 2023

So, what is compassion?

Dr Paul Gilbert, Psychologist and founder of The Compassionate Mind Foundation, describes it as both Engagement – the ability to recognise the emotion and experience of yourself and others AND Action – doing something about it. He notes in particular that compassion requires self-awareness, courage and navigating discomfort. It's wiser, more self-aware, and more committed than kindness, which has of course become a buzz word of late. You can kill with kindness, but not with compassion.

Why is this such a critical part of being a leader now?

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For both professors compassion is an action, not just a mind-set.

What does it mean to lead with compassion?

At its core, compassionate leadership is about fostering an environment of belonging and psychological safety, where people can thrive, innovate, and contribute to their fullest potential.

Compassionate leaders are self-aware enough to notice and navigate their own emotions and needs with care, as well as those of the people they lead.

They are courageous enough to traverse the complexity of the wider environment, with the love and care that the people they lead deserve and demand.

And they are wise enough to acknowledge they don't have all the answers, and to create inclusive coalitions for innovation, strategy and problem solving.

How do compassionate leaders behave?

They empathise with their colleagues and listen to understand the challenges they face. Critically, they are able to tolerate distress – their own and that of others. Interestingly, the word itself comes from *compati* – the Latin for ‘to suffer with’.

Compassionate leaders are committed to supporting both themselves and others to cope with challenges and are focused on enabling those they lead to be effective and thrive in their work.

Gone is the old command and control. Compassionate leaders don't pretend they have all the answers and don't simply tell people what to do. Instead, they engage with and listen to the people they work with to find shared solutions to problems.

According to Professor Michael West, there are four core components of compassionate leadership:

1. Empathising
2. Attending
3. Understanding
4. Helping

Let's look at these in more detail:

1 Empathising

This involves mirroring and feeling colleagues' distress, frustration or joy without being overwhelmed by the emotion themselves and becoming unable to help. Unlike sympathy, empathy requires a leader to truly connect with and feel what others are feeling. All of us are capable of this at our core – humans are social mammals evolved to survive with the group. For too long though the model of western leadership has been suppression of empathy – keeping a stiff upper lip, maintaining a professional distance, not showing emotion. We need to move past this.

“It takes strength to show empathy.”

Jacinda Ardern

Jacinda Ardern's handling of the Pandemic and reaction to the 2019 Christchurch Mosque bombings, where she was visibly shaken and reaching out to the Muslim community in solidarity, was compassionate leadership at its best.

She navigated the Pandemic with a mixture of solace and steel. She was vulnerable, approachable and relatable. One memorable moment saw her hop on to a Facebook Live having just attempted to put her toddler to bed. Inevitably disrupted by her child, she sought to reassure her while simultaneously comforting her people.

Her resignation speech was grounded in empathy:

“*I am human, politicians are human...I am not the first woman to multitask. I am not the first woman to work and have a baby. I know these are special circumstances but there will be many women who will have done this well before I have.*”

2 Attending

This means being present with and focusing on others – ‘listening with fascination’⁴. Listening is probably the most important leadership skill and compassionate leaders take time to listen to the challenges, obstacles, frustrations and harms colleagues experience as well as their accounts of successes and joys⁵. They are attentive listeners – without prejudice or preconception – even to the things they may disagree with or not like to hear. British retailer M&S took leadership listening to the next level when it embarked on an innovative way to allow their people direct access to their CEO. Based on the concept of the ‘listening leader’ they developed a platform called ‘Straight to Stuart’ giving people a place to share ideas and make sure everyone’s voice is heard. CEO Stuart Machin won the Grocer cup for turning the business around through innovation and transformation, directly citing ‘Straight to Stuart’ as one of the agents of this change.

⁴ Kline 2002

⁵ West 2021

3 Understanding

This involves taking time to properly explore and understand the situations people are struggling with. It implies valuing and exploring conflicting perspectives rather than leaders simply imposing their own understanding⁶.

This means inclusivity. Compassionate leaders are genuine champions of DEI. They recognise the value of different perspectives and actively seek to create an inclusive workplace where all voices are heard and respected, and where a genuine sense of belonging exists. This isn't possible without psychological safety – meaning DEI strategy isn't a 'bolt on', rather it's woven into the fabric of the culture.

Tim Cook, Apple's CEO has worked to champion inclusivity in the tech industry. Despite some shareholder proposals urging the company to end its DEI programs and with other companies rolling back their policies, Apple has consistently defended and reaffirmed its commitment to these initiatives.

4 Helping

This involves taking thoughtful and intelligent action to support individuals and teams. Removing obstacles that get in the way of people doing their work (such as chronic excessive workloads, conflicts between departments) and providing the resources people and services need (staff, equipment, training) are the most important tasks for leaders⁷.

The McKinsey research⁸ into the state of employee engagement highlights clearly that without the basics of adequate pay, resources and development, no leader can expect their team to be engaged, putting sustainable productivity at risk as a result.

⁶ Gallo 2017

⁷ McCauley and Fick-Cooper 2020

⁸ 'The state of organisations 2023' McKinsey

Compassion /= weakness

It's a commonly held belief – conscious or subconscious – that there is no place for compassion in business. It's a weakness. Leaders, to be successful, shouldn't show vulnerability or be 'soft'.

But true compassion – the ability to recognise and navigate hard emotions and circumstances, and then act accordingly – is hard.

It takes courage. Firstly, the courage to notice and listen, even when it's uncomfortable – both to yourself and others. Then the courage to be willing to really understand what is going on for other people – even when it is different to your own experience. Then the courage to do something meaningful to help – based not on what your own ego says you should do, but on what is needed. It's a rare leader in our experience that can successfully navigate those types of courage.

Gareth Southgate, manager of the England Football team until 2024, was able to be present and in the moment with his team, rewriting the rule book when it came to football management. He was highly aware of the needs of the team both on the pitch and off, able to tolerate and hold a space for the distress of others.

Southgate demonstrated strength and compassion in equal measure. The nice guy (very nearly) won. The way he led his team, kept the press onside and won all our hearts at the same time was a modern leadership masterclass.

Why compassionate leadership makes for better business

Psychological safety – a proven prerequisite for high performing teams and organisations – takes compassionate leadership. Dr Amy Edmondson's research into psychological safety is well worth exploring. Read her book 'The Fearless Organisation' for more about it. Creating a work environment where employees feel safe to express their thoughts, opinions, and concerns without fear of retribution is a courageous, compassionate practice. But doing so fosters open dialogue, healthy challenge, idea-sharing, and a culture of trust. Those elusive prizes of innovation, creativity and collaboration? They need psychological safety to thrive.

People who work in supportive teams with clear goals and good team leadership, have dramatically lower levels of stress⁹. Compassionate leadership increases staff engagement and satisfaction, resulting in better outcomes for organisations including improved financial performance.¹⁰

What can leaders do today to build a more compassionate leadership culture?

Start with your values and behaviours

What's written on your wall? Is it lived and breathed every day, especially during tough times? Do some people get a free pass on those behaviours if their short-term performance is good?

Leaders take heed from Gruenert and Whitaker's famous quote "The culture of any organisation is shaped by the worst behaviour the leader is willing to tolerate".

Although central to the values of the NHS, in other organisations compassion doesn't necessarily need to be one of your values or a specified behaviour, but the components of it – listening, inclusivity, meaningful support for others – must be threaded through your values and behaviours. And, critically, they must be lived daily, not just as pretty wallpaper in your boardroom.

⁹ West et al 2015

¹⁰ Dawson and West 2018

Look to your existing leaders

In many ways we are asking leaders to go against decades of accepted wisdom by exploring and embracing compassion. Undoubtedly none of them would say they lack compassion today, but almost certainly few of them have the true courage to lead with it daily. And, uncomfortable as it may be to acknowledge, there may be a compassion gap in your own C-Suite or executive team that not only hampers team effectiveness, but also colours the culture throughout your organisation.

Working on your executive team's psychological safety and building an awareness of and appreciation for compassionate leadership will pay dividends throughout your organisation. Hire with compassion in mind and develop existing leaders to nurture and enact their own compassion through coaching and mentoring.

Remove any cultural barriers to compassion

Lastly (or maybe firstly) - make sure you aren't trying to propagate compassionate leadership on infertile ground. Take a good look at the components of your culture and remove or adjust the barriers to compassion.

Look at your ways of working – policy, process, systems – are they designed with the people who use them in mind? Are they built with an underlying assumption of low trust? Do they undermine openness and collaboration? Consider the language and tone of voice of your organisation – is it inclusive? Human? Compassionate? Or is it dry, corporate, or riddled with jargon, acronyms and complexity?

It feels overwhelming, doesn't it? So perhaps the best place to start is right where you are. Fostering self-compassion is the foundation of compassionate leadership and compassionate activism. Working with a coach or exploring the work of Dr Kristen Neff (find her work at self-compassion.org) to support leaders to develop self-compassion and build a foundation for integrating compassion into their leadership are good places to start.

Ways 7 Seas is helping leaders lead with compassion



Working on tone of voice to instil a natural, human, authentic voice in communications



Leadership development focused on the elements of psychological safety and compassion as key for organisational success in the modern workplace



Developing frameworks of behaviours where compassion is integral



Compassion-led executive coaching

Do get in touch with us if you'd like to know more about our approach to compassion at work. You can also listen to our podcast on the compassionate leader [here](#).

About us

7 Seas combines **deep expertise in culture, change, communication and coaching** to create impact and make lasting positive change for a wide range of organisations and their people. From global financial services, to complex NHS Trusts, via Automotive, Energy and some globally recognised brands.

With extensive experience in the public, private and third sectors, we bring our wealth of knowledge to you and your people. Whatever your challenges, we have likely seen it before. We've been there, done it and absolutely got the T shirt (it's probably got a band slogan on).

We do it with our **values of courage, compassion and creativity** as our north star, and our promise to you.

We help our clients **develop their organisational values and behaviours** to drive the positive cultures that fuel strategy and purpose. We work to **embed that culture across the organisation**, by identifying where in your cultural ecosystem the biggest impacts can be made.

We coach and develop leaders and their senior teams to equip them with the skills to face the challenges of the modern workplace – culture starts at the top.

We create strategies to **bring your people on the journey of change**, engaging, involving and motivating them as you go.

We develop compelling **Employee Value Propositions** and **Employer brands** to attract, retain and inspire talent.

We help you **tell the story of your organisation** and its strategy, bringing it to life, making it meaningful for all. Our creative team creates consumer grade campaigns designed to cut through and move your people.

We present and podcast (**'The Deep C Dive'**), we write and publish on culture, we chair conferences and sit on industry judging panels. We win awards with our clients for the impact we've made on their organisation.

We'd love to do this for you. Please **get in touch** to hear what we're doing for organisations like yours and ways we can help make your place a better place to be.



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New perspectives from 7 Seas



About the authors



Lorna Leeson, Managing Director

Lorna has an MSc in Strategic Human Resource Management, a degree in Theatre and Performance and is a Fellow of the CIPD. She's an Executive Coach, working with transformational leaders to recognise their role in creating cultures that thrive. She has also led large global, multi-generational teams of her own. Lorna is driven by helping clients create more human workplaces and loves nothing more than unpicking a cultural or

change puzzle. When she isn't working with the best clients in the world to shape people-centred cultures, she sings in a band, attends the odd improv class and is Cool Auntie (their words, not hers) and Godmother to a tribe of incredible future leaders.



Charlotte Dahl, Managing Director

Charlotte is an accomplished culture and communications consultant, speaker, writer, trainer and facilitator. She has a unique view on culture, engagement and internal communications, having spent equal parts of her career in consumer, then employee communications. Having worked for clients spanning every industry sector, she brings the insight

and quality from the world of advertising into organisational culture and communication. She is passionate about raising the profile, standards and effectiveness of internal communication and employee experience, believing employees deserve the same care, consideration, and creativity in communication as customers. She is mother to three phenomenal humans who entertain, inspire and encourage her to reach for the stars every single day.

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Want to learn more about how 7 Seas can help you and your organisation?

Drop us a line at lorna@7seasculture.com or charlotte@7seasculture.com