

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY COMPASSION?

The current social and economic pressures for productivity and efficiency and the pace in which we live our lives, seem to take away the room to care for others, and ourselves. This is reflected in rising feelings of isolation and distrust, as well as in the high number of people experiencing psychological distress at work:

GALLUP'S RECENT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT 76% OF EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCE BURNOUT AT LEAST SOMETIMES, WITH THE LACK OF SUPPORT OR RECOGNITION FROM LEADERS AS MAIN REASON.

The everyday reality of organisational life often obscures human moments at work, reducing the likelihood that people can notice suffering or the time for responding. To bring back humanity into the workplace and rebuild trust as the social glue that catalyses relationships, compassionate behaviour, especially shown by leaders, is considered an opportunity. Compassion allows us to recognise and relate to the universal human need to belong and connect to others.

OUR HUMAN COMPASSION BINDS US THE ONE TO THE OTHER – NOT IN PITY OR PATRONIZINGLY, BUT AS HUMAN BEINGS WHO HAVE LEARNT HOW TO TURN OUR COMMON SUFFERING INTO HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

- NELSON MANDELA

Hence, interest in compassion at work is growing, showing promising results. It reveals benefits for both the individual and the business, as it supports more fully healing, strengthens emotional connections, and leads to more optimal functioning and higher organisational commitment. However, despite these clear advantages and the wish from leaders to develop compassionate leadership, compassion research is only in its infancy and especially compassionate leadership is yet undiscovered. This is reflected in the outcome of a previously done study by Harvard Business Review, showing that 80% of surveyed leaders want to develop their compassion but do not know how. For most managers, idealistic definitions of compassion are probably too broad in scope or too confusing to be useful.

SO, WHAT'S COMPASSION?

Compassion is broadly defined as the feeling that arises in witnessing someone's suffering which motivates a following desire to help. It can be seen as a multidimensional process including four key components:

- Awareness of suffering
- Being emotionally moved by suffering
- Wish to see the relief of suffering
- Responsiveness to help relieve suffering

This definition reveals the incorporation of two distinct functional psychological processes: motivated engagement and motivated action. The latter component of actively responding to relieve pain distinguishes compassion from similar constructs such as empathy and sympathy. In addition, compassion requires resilience to avoid being overwhelmed by intense emotions that make someone less capable of acting helpfully.

Generally, the focus of compassion is on the act of being compassionate for others who suffer. However, in fact there are three separate orientations and directional flows of compassion [1]:

- COMPASSION FOR OTHERS
- SELF-COMPASSION
- COMPASSION FROM OTHERS

&WHAT'S COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP?

Luckily, the first practical conceptualisation of compassionate leadership was recently introduced [2], with the development of the Compassionate Leader Behaviour Index (CLBI). They found that compassionate leadership constituted of six behaviours:

- ACCOUNTABILITY
- INTEGRITY
- PRESENCE
- EMPATHY
- AUTHENTICITY
- DIGNITY

They also discovered that compassion was not something that leaders applied as a useful skill, but it rather was described as an approach to experience work and life.

^[1] Gilbert, P., Catarino, F., Duarte, C., Matos, M., Kolts, R., Stubbs, J., Ceresatto, L., Duarte, J., Pinto-Gouveia, J., & Basran, J. (2017). The development of compassionate engagement and action scales for self and others.

^[2] Shuck, B., Alagaraja, M., Immekus, J., Cumberland, D., & Honeycutt-Elliott, M. (2019). Does Compassion Matter in Leadership? A Two-Stage Sequential Equal Status Mixed Method Exploratory Study of Compassionate Leader Behavior and Connections to Performance in Human Resource Development.

LEADING TO THE CURRENT STUDY

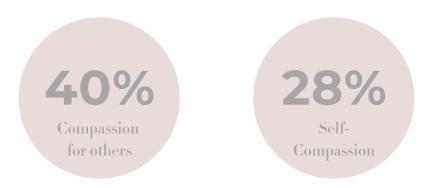
Based on these findings and theoretical conceptualisations, the current study aimed to gain a better understanding of how leaders' compassionate behaviour at work is affected by their general psychological levels of compassion on three subscales: compassion for others, self-compassion, and received compassion from others. Additional factors that were expected to account for compassion differences and to predict compassionate leadership included gender and hierarchical rank.

The personal compassion levels were quantitatively measured with a survey that included the Compassionate Engagement and Action Scales, developed. And in this same survey, questions from the CLBI were asked to measure participants' compassionate leadership. The survey was shared amongst the researcher's digital network, using different mediums such as e-mail and LinkedIn.

103 PARTICIPANTS 39 MEN 21 FIRST LEVEL 35 TOP LEVEL

FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

After the data was analysed, it was found that the only significant predictors of compassionate leadership are: compassion for others and self-compassion.



COMPASSION TO OTHERS MODERATELY AFFECTS COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

The positive influence of 'compassion for others' on compassionate leadership aligns with the researcher's expectation, as the CLBI emphasises the other-oriented approach to leadership where followers' needs are prioritised. This finding seems to confirm the suggestion that compassionate leadership is predicted by a natural part of who people are; their compassionate approach to life in general.

SELF-COMPASSION WEAKLY AFFECTS COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

This is reinforced by the significant influence of self-compassion on compassionate leadership. The findings suggest that having that same kindness and caring motivation for yourself as for others also positively affect leaders' compassionate behaviours, only just weakly.

SO WHAT?

Based on the finding that 'compassion for others' and 'self-compassion' positively influence compassionate leadership, it is recommended to develop these psychological competencies within leaders who want to enhance their compassionate leadership behaviours. It is useful to realise that developing compassionate leadership seems to require the development of a general mindset to life, aligning with the growing recognition that

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TO FOCUS ON HOW LEADERS THINK AND ACT RATHER THAN ON A SET OF ATTRIBUTES AND SKILLS.

The good news is: compassion indeed can be developed. However, it will not be easy as it requires changing people's brains, to break through the evolved boundaries around caring and helping behaviour. Despite people being instinctively programmed to connect and feel compassion, it requires effort and lots of practice to develop this competency. Especially in today's organisations and societies where often undercurrents of scarcity and competition are present. Our environment makes it easy to lose ourselves in a game of comparison, pitting one against the other, instead of treating each other with compassion and kindness. And so, it also requires courage from leaders. Courage to be different, to let go of past certainties, challenge your emotional reactions, and open your heart.

LEADERS AIMING TO DEVELOP THEIR COMPASSION SHOULD ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND THAT THEIR JOURNEY IS TOWARDS TRANSFORMING THEIR MINDS.

Divergent from expected is the outcome that gender, hierarchical rank, and experienced compassion from others do not significantly influence compassionate behaviour shown by leaders.

COMPASSION FROM OTHERS DOES NOT AFFECT COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

This finding is contradicting the outcomes of previous studies which suggested that experiencing compassion makes people better able to show compassion to others; often referred to as compassion spirals.

More research into the effects of 'compassion from others' is suggested, also based on this study's finding that top leaders receive less compassion from others than first-level leaders do. Despite the insignificant influence of 'compassion from others' on compassionate leadership, the suggestion that climbing the hierarchical ladder is associated with lower received compassion from others can be alarming. Especially because loneliness at work has negative implications such as decreased cooperativeness and increased anxiety.



HIERARCHY DOES NOT AFFECT COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

This outcome could indicate that no matter what position within the organisation's hierarchy, someone could practice compassionate leadership. Sparking interest into whether compassionate leadership is restricted to leaders only or if it could be operationalised by anyone in an organisation. Generally, there is agreement on the role of leaders and their responsibility in influencing from a top-down perspective. Yet, compassion is available to everyone, meaning that the accessibility of influence, noticing someone, and taking action highlights the potential for compassionate leadership to be different from the traditional definitions of leadership. To build compassionate organisations, it might be effective to abandon heroic, individualistic models of leadership towards a model of shared, distributive leadership.



MEAN SCORES

BUT GENDER DOES NOT AFFECT COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

As women are stereotypically attributed caring competencies, it was expected that women show more compassionate leadership than men. But despite the finding that female leaders are slightly more compassionate for others than male leaders are, other outcomes of this study suggest that gender does not affect the extent to which they practice compassionate leadership. Apparently, the influence of women's higher levels of compassion for others is not reflected in their compassionate leadership behaviour. A potential explanation for this might relate to the socially constructed expectations of what leadership should look like and what is considered as legitimate behaviour. Leaders might feel restricted to practise compassionate leadership, as these behaviours deviate from the traditional conceptualisation of leadership which emphasises more masculine characteristics. In many business communities, compassion has an image of being 'soft' and without connection to performance, demanding more audacity of leaders to show this type of behaviour and deviate from the standard. This finding could indicate that breaking through the masculine leadership conceptualisation is equally as challenging or easy for both genders.

WHAT WE DID NOT LOOK INTO

The present research findings show that all variables researched are only weak, moderately or insignificantly influencing compassionate leadership, leading to the question: What other factors play a role in the ability of leaders to show compassionate leadership?

Overall, researchers agree that these might be related to organisations' structures and cultures. A task-oriented, bureaucratic environment might not allow leaders the space and time to show compassionate leadership. And so, for compassionate leadership to be developed, a paradigm shift from the dehumanising model of the organisation as a machine of command and control towards one of the organisation as a living complex adaptive system is suggested. Based on these streams of thinking,

FUTURE RESEARCH INTO THE SUPPORTIVE OR RESTRICTING INFLUENCE OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES AND CULTURES ON LEADERS' ABILITY TO SHOW COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP IS RECOMMENDED.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study comes with valuable implications, there are a few factors that may limit the findings, such as that the chosen design of this study does not allow to infer causality because a chronological sequence could not be established. Also, the majority of the participants live and work in The Netherlands. As experiences of compassion may vary by culture the same way that leadership has been shown to differ, a more diverse sample in terms of nationalities might have provided a more nuanced outcome.

THIS STUDY CONTRIBUTES TO AN ADVANCED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRACTICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP, WHICH HOPEFULLY ENABLES MORE CL TO BE DEVELOPED AND STIMULATES FURTHER RESEARCH INTO THIS IMPACTFUL TOPIC.

FINALLY, RECONSIDERING SOME OF THE TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON WORK AND LEADERSHIP SEEM REQUIRED TO DEVELOP A COMPASSIONATE MIND, COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP, AND COMPASSIONATE ORGANISATIONS.

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