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COMPASS

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LEADER

Introduction

When you think of leadership roles or talk of being a leader, the word compassion doesn't typically come to mind. The reality is most people don't realize that compassion is one of those qualities that differentiates a good leader from a great one.

The average leader has been conditioned to believe that they should put business before compassion, to rule with their minds and not their hearts. The conventional image the general populous has of an influential leader is someone who is decisive, tough, strong, result-driven, hard-nosed and ultra-rational. But here's what's closer to the truth – prominent leaders also possess the confidence, courage, and conviction to cultivate compassion and connectivity.

Although it's a quality that we see around us on a daily basis, most people still see compassion as a somewhat distant and self-sacrificing ideal. They consider it an unrealistic response of those that are naively sentimental or all too kind-hearted and are seen as mushy or too soft or diluting hard decisions when they should be stern and stoic and even ruthless in their approach to business. But as the times change, so too do the people's attitude towards compassionate leaders. More organizations are now having an interest in a more compassionate style of leading, one that is from the heart and not entirely from the head. While this may seem like nothing more than human kindness, it also makes practical business sense. Most employees won't be able to put in their best in an environment filled with negative emotions. A lot of productivity and performance problems lie in this emotion-filled area. Any leader that wants his or her followers to perform at their optimal best, then they need to first connect at the emotional level, and this connectivity is compassion.

Although we may try to convince ourselves that there's no space for compassion and connection, the truth is that the greatest leaders always make time for some compassion. They care about connecting with the people that follow them. They believe connectivity is the conduit for almost all they do, and compassion is the key to that connectivity.

Compassionate leaders possess the innate ability to inspire people with hope, optimism, energy and purpose. This is because they resonate and can empathize and connect with the people they lead.

Even though a driven, directive and coercive leadership style may motivate people in the short term, the discord it sparks creates an environment filled with toxic emotions like anger, apathy, and anxiety and also causes dramatic long-term damage. Compassion and connectivity don't only help in bolstering emotional and social factors that help to create a vibrant work relationship. According to research, they are also essential elements that help workers maintain emotional balance, build up their reserves of resilience, relieve leadership stress, insulate yourself from the harmful effects of toxic emotions, and renew yourself.

Compassionate Leaders in History

Before we continue, let us take a step back in time and look at some of the greatest leaders in history. And yes, some may be considered controversial. But that doesn't take away the valuable lessons you can pick from their styles of leadership which can be applied in today's society.

1. Napoleon Bonaparte

If you peel back the layers of history, one of those great but ruthless leaders you'll find is the French leader Napoleon Bonaparte. Even though most of his decisions were quite controversial, he was also a leader that was very in touch with his followers. Napoleon was once described in an article as a leader who completed tasks that most people would consider beneath his role on a regular basis. Wherever he was needed on the battlefield, he was there.

Although modern day business can sometimes be ruthless, it still can't be compared to an old war zone. However, the key lesson to learn from Napoleon is his willingness to get his hands dirty with his workers. Even though he was an Emperor, he didn't consider any job beneath him, and he was committed to the responsibility of getting the job done. As a modern day leader, there's no denying that there's a lesson to be learned from the story of Napoleon.

His willingness to complete tasks meant for others made his men believe that he actually cared about the cause and what they were fighting for. The lesson here is this; learn to take part in the work of your followers. By adopting a hands-on approach, you'll be able to connect with your workers on an individual and more intimate level. It also showcases your commitment to the cause that all of you are working towards which could bring about a more passionate work ethic from your employees.

2. Nelson Mandela

He is one of the most influential leaders in history. The life of Nelson Mandela is filled with countless lessons all of which can be applied to people management and business leadership. One lesson that stands out is his lifelong belief in learning. Mandela himself holds degrees from six higher education institutions which include the University of South Africa, the University of Fort Hart and the University of London. To paraphrase one of his more popular quotes "Education is the most powerful weapon that you have at your disposal to change the world."

Education should not stop just because you've earned your first degree. Part of what lifelong learning entails is a willingness to continue learning and growing from your experiences as well as going back to study at a later date. Education enriches us with a better understanding of people and ideas which in turn makes us better informed and wiser leaders.

3. John F Kennedy

This former US president is known as one of the history's more controversial leaders. John F Kennedy is examined mostly for his big thinking ability and for the constant high goals he wanted the people of America to achieve. President Kennedy had great machinations and was unafraid to set goals that other people would consider unachievable. Everyone can learn from Kennedy – from aspiring leaders to the ones already established in their respective fields. Learn to set hard to reach goals that will challenge you in the workplace. The greatest leaders don't seek out tasks that can easily be achieved. They seek out change as well as jobs that will revolutionize. To become a good leader, you need to start challenging your skill set and carry your team to greatness.

4. Margaret Thatcher

Her famous nickname "The Iron Lady" garnered all kinds of popularity for this controversial British Prime Minister. Regardless of her experiences, one thing that was constant throughout her career was her incredible resilience, part of what earned her the famous nickname. No matter how tough a challenge appeared, she was always able to

rise to the occasion. In fact, the more difficult the problem, the more it seemed she rose to the occasion, and she appeared to enjoy every process of it. Her leadership style was a reflection of her personality; she was a challenge-oriented individual with a strong sense of self and confidence. As a leader, you're guaranteed to face adversities and challenges, and in those situations, you'll need to be resilient. There's no greater example of a leader who displayed resilience in times of challenge and adversity than Margaret Thatcher.

5. Mahatma Gandhi

Of all the leaders previously mentioned, none conjures up the image of compassion more than Mahatma Gandhi. He is considered as one of the most compassionate and ethical leaders to have ever lived. He is known for the quote “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.” This quote was an indication of his desire to change the world and his belief that he could accomplish it in a compassionate way.

As a leader, Gandhi possessed the ability to step into the shoes of others and gain a deeper understanding of the issue from their perspective. The capacity to have compassion and empathize with those around you is integral to the characteristic of a great leader. With those qualities, you can connect more easily with those you lead and show them that you care and have an interest in what they're going through.

Overall, the leadership qualities exhibited by the five leaders mentioned above are one all modern day leaders should aspire to cultivate. Some of the lessons that can be learned from them include: doing what you've asked others to do, the importance of education, aspiring to achieve lofty goals, the advantage of being resilient, and last but not least, the value of having compassion as a leader.

Building a Case for Compassion

One of the realities we face today is the absence of compassionate leadership in the workplace. Fortunately, that is starting to change. Over the past decade, more organizations are starting to come to the realization that emotions do make for a safe and efficient workplace. They've realized that leaders also need to possess a high level of emotional intelligence. This growing interest in leading with feelings has paved the way forward in taking the next step of cultivating a more compassionate leader.

As organizations begin to shift to a more caring, emphatic and emotionally intelligent style of leadership, creates some issues in the minds of people such as: "what is compassion? What does it being a compassionate leader entail? How do you fit compassion into a context of effective leadership? And finally, can compassion be learned?"

You'll be happy to note that there's a good bit of research going on in this area right now which would hopefully shed some light on some of these questions and elaborate on the still-emerging answers. Besides the definitive neurological observations, several researchers in HR, as well as the human sciences, have started to reveal that compassion is an active attribute a lot of the major leadership areas. Compassion, for example:

- Helps to tune up our empathy which in turn promotes a more effective and connective leadership style.
- Helps to calm the physiological effects of leader stress by calming your body reactions.
- Is crucial in helping to maintain emotional balance and manage disruptive moods.
- It insulates against the harmful effects of toxic emotions on the mind and the body.
- It opens you up to a host of other positive emotions like hope and optimism.
- Helps to build up your reserve of resilience which is essential in handling setbacks.
- It increases your well-being.
- Helps to renew and sustain the energy levels of leaders.

Another benefit of cultivating compassion is that it contributes to other positive changes in how a leader leads, handles the stress and unavoidable toxicity of the job, and how he or she relates well to others. This quality of compassion also allows leaders exude less employee disapproval and instead show more concern making them easier to approach. Reduced displays of toxic emotions like anxiety and anger create a calm and more

emotionally balanced approach, and this increased understanding and empathy, in turn, increases the trust between staff and leaders.

The Components of Compassion

What are the elements of compassion? What is it made up of? What makes up compassion? To answer this completely, we can't just rely heavily on modern western psychology and shun the venerable ancient contribution of Eastern religion and practices, such as Buddhism, which considers compassion as one of its four main pillars. Most of the time, the West tends to focus on emotional dysfunction instead of how to cultivate positive emotions, and nothing has been more neglected than compassion.

To paraphrase the words of Lorne Ladner's *The Lost Art of Compassion*, we've been taught how to work with negative and often damaging emotions, but nowhere in western psychology has it offered one clear, well researched and practical method that can be used to develop compassion.

Although the east and the west have their differences in how they understand compassion, some of its essential components are common to both practices. These are:

1. Respect and Caring

Authors Boyatzis and McKee have described compassion as involving curiosity, caring, real empathy and respect towards other people. This belief is also echoed by The Dalai Lama who has defined it as "a mental attitude that is associated with a sense of responsibility, respect, and commitment."

2. Empathy

The religion of Buddhism considers compassion a deep understanding of the emotional state of another, which is not that different from the western idea of empathy. So it is safe to say that compassion makes us feel empathy. This is, of course, a slight reversal of the thought of the West which sees empathy as what allows us to connect with other people and makes it possible to feel compassion.

3. Selfless and Unconditional

Both eastern and western tradition consider these conditions essential for compassion. The ability to put the need of others before yours and not favor trade, or expect something in return or give or withhold compassion just because you see someone like your friend or your foe. Compassion means selflessly giving of yourself. It does not expect or assumes equal exchange or a tradeoff.

4. Committed Action

Compassion is empathy and caring in action. It is a willingness to act out on those feelings. According to the Dalai Lama, genuine compassion is not only an emotional response but also a firm commitment that is characterized by action.

5. Beneficial to Others

In Buddhism and eastern philosophy, compassion is meant to alleviate suffering. In the west, compassion is all about being benevolent with no thought of personal gain.

It can be difficult to feel true genuine compassion. It is usually when the relationship with the other party is one filled with positivity and positive emotions. It becomes much harder when such feelings are absent or when the relationship is tainted by dislike, envy, indifference and resentment.

It is essential for every one of us, both leaders and otherwise, to act compassionately. However, one more thing still needs to be considered. We must first find this mental state of compassion inside of us, and then make our intentions for being compassionate as clear-cut as possible. We can carry out compassionate acts which will result in good consequences, but if you were to delve deeper, why did you do it?

Since compassion is a state of mind or heart, you cannot measure it by a person's outward behavior which can easily be misconstrued as benevolent when the truth is the motivations are selfish desires, habit rather than a genuine feeling of compassion, and fear.

The Dilemma with Being a Compassionate Leader

The fundamental belief and thought behind compassion are a true connection in situations where people are suffering and being able to take action whenever and wherever possible to help alleviate some of that suffering. Because of how they act and what they do, compassionate leaders can create a positively energized and emotionally healthy workplace. They have a genuine care for the well-being of others and pay close attention to their needs which they place before theirs. They are aware of how their feelings impact the mood of others. Compassionate leaders can connect with their followers through empathy and use this connection to keep in tune and in touch with the thoughts and feelings of others. They also use positive emotions to inspire others and reduce toxic emotions that demoralize and sows discord in the workplace.

But being a compassionate leader also comes with its own dilemma. A compassionate leader works to relieve the pain of others, but as a leader, one inevitable side effect of leading is creating pain. Creating pain comes with the territory of being a leader. While leaders sometimes provide excitement and inspiration, leadership is also mostly about pushing the limit, setting new directions, and making decisions that won't necessarily make you popular with your followers. In fact, you're more often going to leave them feeling frustrated, angry, afraid and disillusioned.

Great leaders understand the dynamics of leaderships and usually take steps to minimize, mitigate and soak up some of the pain they generate. Some of the side effects of leading include:

- Toxic emotions

These are produced by you or picked up from others. They leave a residual in the body that most times severely affect us unless you possess the skills needed to learn to let go of them. If they remain in the body, they slowly create holes in our defenses. Bursts of adrenaline gradually wear down the body's immune system which results in mental and physical ill-health

- Leading Stress

Having to handle constant cries, making hard decisions, constantly looking out for the well-being of others can be draining. Your reserves of empathy, resonance, and connectivity can and will dry up, and even the most resonant leaders will slip into dissonance.

They end up dispirited, burnt out, abrupt, scratchy and abrasive. And because human emotions are contagious, this sense of discord quickly spreads to those around us and will eventually permeate your organization.

The busier we are, the more stressed out we become which in turn causes us to lose our groundedness. We get thrown off balance, and our energy, focus, and equilibrium start to wane. This causes us to become distant, and we lose any sense of connection which is essential for compassion. Our focus begins to center more on us, on how tired we are, of how behind we are in the game and how much is demanded of us, all of which makes us more disconnected. Prolonged periods of dissonance will promote the spread of toxic behavior and emotions which spread easily to affect that that you lead.

The Results of Practicing Compassion

To counter the toxic effects of dissonance, leaders need to cultivate behaviors and habits of the mind that relieve or at least dilute them. Before you can return to the state of resonance, you must renew yourself through a conscious process of physical and mental practices that inspire, reenergize and can counter the effects of stress.

Behavior and Traits of a Compassionate Leader.

Now that you've seen the benefits of adopting a more compassionate style of leadership let us now identify the behaviors and characteristics that make a compassionate leader stand out from the rest. These traits include:

1. A focus on Connection and Collaboration

A compassionate leader demonstrates a people first approach as well as staff centeredness. They also showcase high levels of Emotional Intelligence and can regulate their own feelings and assist those they lead to perform the same. Compassionate leaders have a highly developed people's aspect of leadership. They also showcase high levels of commitment and empathy that allows them to understand how their actions and decisions could affect those they lead. Compassionate leaders invest a lot of effort and time into their staff.

2. Flexibility and Adaptability

Compassionate leaders are flexible and able to adapt to the environment they find themselves which allows for tailor-made approaches to specific situations and followers. This allows for a more personalized and less standardized cookie cutter approach to leadership and solutions. Because of this, compassionate leaders can respond to toe particular situation or person instead of using previously learned ways of responding, or using behavioral profiles that are most times influenced heavily by unhelpful cultural beliefs and assumptions of an organization. Compassion makes leadership less reactive and more thoughtful.

3. Balanced and Self-Caring

Every compassionate leader can demonstrate a capacity and understanding to look after themselves and then model this self-care to their followers. Compassionate leaders are balanced in whatever they do. They can look after themselves as well as others and are still able to attend to corporate drivers, targets, and goals. Compassionate leaders

understand the value of encouraging, ensuring and facilitating those that they lead to have a balance between work and life which engaging in practices they preach.

4. Enabling, Empowering and Inclusive

Compassionate leaders are all about empowering and enabling self-reflection and development. They deliver positive and constructive feedback that focuses on developing potential and talent. Even when the feedback is aimed at addressing performance issues, the compassionate leader delivers it in such a manner that the employees who received the feedback feels understood, respected and heard and doesn't feel like it was a personal attack on him or her. Compassionate leaders also encourage conversations that facilitate change through the relational aspects of leadership. Their manner of communication is inclusive, doesn't involve making demands or not talking at those they lead, and in fact facilitated dialogue and conversations that is of value to each stakeholder and which in turn encourages and promote engagement and commitment.

5. Open and Transparent

As a compassionate leader, you understand that being human is ok and that sometimes it involves making mistakes. In fact, leaders that are transparent and capable of sharing their mistakes are the ones employees are more comfortable approaching and relating to as they feel more human. Many leaders in the corporate world are more likely to beat themselves up when they make a mistake, or they may feel beaten up by stakeholders. The simple truth is that although some errors can be costly, we are all human and as such, prone to mistakes. Compassionate leaders accept this as a fact of business and life

This, of course, does not exclude consequences or the accountability for poor judgment and behavior. A compassionate leader, however, considers mistakes as opportunities to learn and develop from without feeling the need to beat themselves up over it. Typically, leaders who aspire to unattainable or unrealistic goals are more prone to judging themselves and anyone else who is unable to meet up with their unrealistic expectations. Such leaders also tend to cover up their mistake or misrepresent the fact.

6. Authentic and Genuine

Compassionate leaders are authentic and values based. Their followers find out there is never a need to question the motives of any leader behaviors or decisions. They (the followers) are also aware that they are made with the greater good in mind and not some self-serving leadership behavior that is known to be pervasive in traditional and corporate management cultures.

7. **Committed and Courageous**

Because compassion is such a rare trait in the business world, compassionate leaders display a distinct level of courage when they chose to be compassionate to themselves or others. After all, they are working against the grain and more than likely challenging the typical management status quo and expectations of how a leader should behave. They possess a sense of responsibility and duty to do the right thing, to act ethically, and to assess the impact of behaviors and decisions on everyone that may be affected by them.

Conclusion

If there's one thing that should be taken away from this book, it is the value of a compassionate style of leadership.

Many essential characteristics and values need to be learned before you can call yourself a successful leader. It is my belief that the principal ingredient to a successful leader is compassion. Most people see compassion as a sign of weakness and being soft, but the truth is that true compassion is that characteristic that is needed to convert knowledge into wisdom. As a wise leader, one of the tools at your disposal that you can use to perceive the needs of those you lead is compassion. It allows you to astutely determine a course of action that would be of the greatest benefit to both the team and the individual.

The highest form of leadership cannot exist without compassion, and there are several definitions of leadership. For the most part, we all have our own understanding of what leadership is. Some consider leadership to be about control and command, and others believe it is setting an example and hoping that other people will follow it. There are also those who believe that leadership involves helping a group of individuals exonerate themselves from the oppression of a second group. The definitions of leadership are vast and in many shades. However, the noblest and the highest form of leadership can only be realized when compassion is the primary operating element.