

8 Compassionate Organisations

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Introduction

In recent years, a new social and economic organisational paradigm has emerged in which companies are beginning to change their models of governance. This new approach shifts away from a hierarchical, controlling and egocentric vision, towards a more humanistic approach (Chiva, 2014).

The greater emphasis on human practices such as compassion in organisations is consistent with a paradigm shift in the social sciences towards the neurological, psychological and sociological bases of human interrelationships that have interests other than self-interest at their core. It is precisely in this context that compassionate organisations emerge.

Compassion at work is a timely research topic that, although still in its infancy in the management scholarship, is gaining importance in the recent literature. Interest in compassion in the management sciences was catalysed by Frost's (1999) proclamation that Compassion Counts! and gained weight in the research through the claim, some years later, that the inevitable pain generated within organisations calls for an academic response (Frost, 2003).

Compassion is defined as an interpersonal process involving the noticing, sense-making, feeling and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person (Dutton et al., 2014). Throughout this chapter we explore the concept of compassion and examine how it is created and extended in the workplace.

Being compassionate can be seen as 'weak' behaviour in business that can get in the way of performance management; however, according to the Harvard Business Review (Fryer, 2013) companies are now increasingly adopting more compassionate management, and it appears to be a strategic investment that helps set them apart from their competitors.

This chapter examines the study of compassion and compassionate organisations by first addressing the suffering that inevitably exists in organisations. Compassion and the subprocesses of response to suffering in relation to compassionate organisations are then defined. Next, we explore how compassionate organisations achieve high levels of

compassion among their members through four key compassion competencies and six basic principles of social architecture. We then examine the different organisational levels to understand how compassion emerges at a personal, a relational and an organisational level. We outline the implications compassion has for recipients, givers and onlookers, as well as for the company as a whole. Finally, we propose some practices that can facilitate compassion in organisations, and that may therefore propagate the concept of compassionate organisations.

The Presence of Suffering in Organisations

Suffering is an important part of the human condition, and as such is always latent in all of us. Can suffering be avoided at work? Given that we spend most of our waking hours at work, it is illusory to think that suffering can remain separate from this immense investment of time. Suffering is therefore inevitable among the members of an organisation.

Our workplaces are a clear reflection of the beliefs of our time and of a social system in which the prevailing cultural climate of negativity, fear, division and self-interest causes suffering for many people. However, suffering experienced in the workplace may have its origins in different sources, both within and outside organisations.

Some sources of suffering are detailed below (Lilius et al., 2008):

- Suffering at work may be due to events in the individual's personal life. Suffering can flow from outside work boundaries. For example, it may come from one's own illness or that of a loved one, the death of a family member or friend, the breakup of a romantic relationship, addictions or financial difficulties.
- Suffering at work can come from the job itself due to, for example, job stress, interactions with a hostile co-worker or an abusive boss. Having to deal with overly demanding clients or jobs with responsibility for taking care of others can also cause distress or burnout.
- Suffering at work can be caused by organisational actions, such as mass layoffs, company restructuring, a merger that produces severe conflict, poorly handled change, organisational sources of pain such as uncivil behaviour by work colleagues and workplace injury. Likewise, the unethical behaviour of other companies can also indirectly affect an organisation's workers. In addition, managers under heavy pressure to deliver results may come down hard on their teams when targets are not met.

Suffering is therefore a pervasive and inevitable part of organisational life and has a significant impact on both employees and organisations.

This suffering is costly for individuals, organisations and society in general. When a person suffers, they find it difficult to give themselves fully to their work, which translates into a decrease in their performance

and productivity. It also generates costs due to absenteeism, employee turnover, compensation or even expenses derived from medical, legal or insurance assistance.

However, suffering also has costs that are not quantifiable: human costs. These include a variety of psychological, physiological and interpersonal outcomes such as lower quality of life, a diminished sense of self-worth, a weakened immune system and workplace sabotage by those experiencing some type of suffering (Kanov et al., 2004). The physical and emotional costs of human pain often outweigh any financial cost that may be involved.

Fortunately, suffering can be remedied by compassion, which, like suffering, is also present in organisations. Where suffering exists, there is also the capacity for compassion. Compassion occurs when suffering is met with concern and caring responses. Compassion is a felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering (Dutton et al., 2014). Importantly, compassion always unfolds in relation to suffering. This differentiates compassion from other positive interpersonal concepts.

Compassion: Definition and Process

Definition of Compassion

Compassion is defined as an interpersonal process involving the noticing, sense-making, feeling and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person (Dutton et al., 2014). Hence, compassion can be considered as a four-part interrelated process that involves: (1) noticing the suffering of others, (2) making sense of suffering in a way that contributes to a desire to alleviate it, (3) feeling empathic concern for those who are suffering and (4) taking action to alleviate suffering in some way (Dutton et al., 2014; Worline & Dutton, 2017).

Compassionate Organisations: Interrelated Compassion Process

Each subprocess – noticing suffering, engaging in sense-making about what has occurred, feeling empathic concern and acting to alleviate it – is important, and each needs to be understood to fully comprehend compassion at work. In the following sections we expand on these subprocesses. In Figure 8.1, the bidirectional arrows between the subprocesses indicate that they do not necessarily unfold sequentially, and the overall response process can flow back and forth dynamically between subprocesses (Atkins & Parker 2012).

Noticing Suffering

The process of compassion begins with noticing another person's suffering and becoming aware of the pain they are feeling. This requires

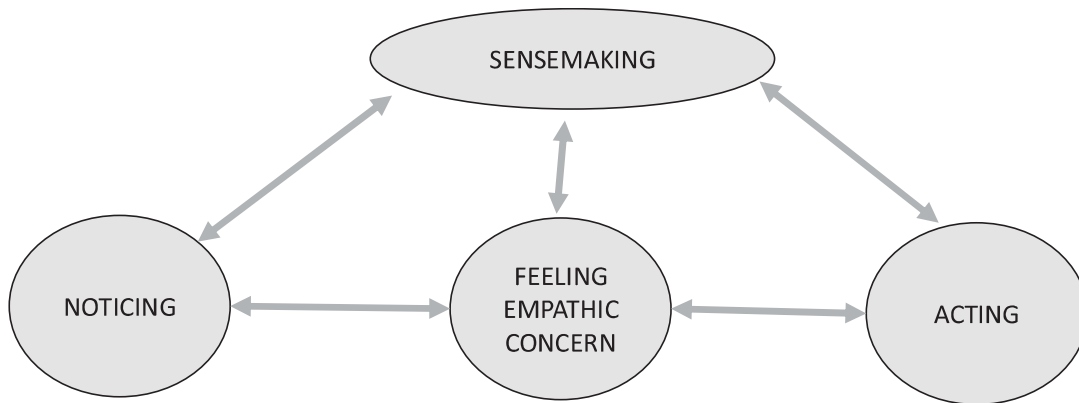


Figure 8.1 Subprocesses of response to suffering.

Source: The authors.

us to be attentive to what is happening around us and to have an open and receptive attitude towards those we interact with. It involves paying attention to others' emotions and reading subtle cues in our interactions with them.

This ability to notice others' suffering depends on the moment and the person. On the one hand, we are more likely to detect the suffering of a person when we ourselves have experienced a similar type of pain, when we feel an appreciation for that person or when we consider them as very similar to ourselves. On the other hand, we are often unable to notice suffering, even when it is right in front of us, when we are fully immersed in our work and worried about our own problems or deadlines.

Compassionate Organisations: Collective Noticing

Developing the ability to notice others' suffering is a critical first step towards creating a compassionate organisation. Understanding the role of individuals in this collective process is important because the organisations themselves cannot feel the pain. Rather, it is the members of the organisation who can pick up on the emotional cues around them. Organisations play a critical role in this process by influencing, through certain structures, systems and practices, what their members notice and attend to in their environments.

Therefore, the organisational characteristics of a company play an essential role in developing compassionate organisations. Organisational policies and shared values can inhibit or enhance the extent to which members notice the pain of their peers. Aspects of the physical architecture of the organisation, as well as technologies that facilitate communication, make it easier for members to access each other and therefore appreciate the suffering in their organisation.

Sense-making: Interpreting Suffering as Relevant and Worthy

Sense-making is understood as the interpretive process that turns a disruptive and unintelligible circumstance into an understandable situation worthy of action.

In order for the process of compassion to advance we must consider the other person's suffering deserving of our concern. When altruistic, cooperative and trustworthy people of good character suffer, we consider them worthy of our concern. By contrast, people to whom we apportion responsibility and blame for their own suffering may be considered less worthy or deserving of our concern, or there may be circumstances in which we do not trust our own ability to respond adequately to their real needs. In these cases, the process of compassion would be halted and there would be no compassionate act.

For the process of compassion to continue the experienced situation must be interpreted positively. Suffering is often hidden behind mistakes at work, missed deadlines, absence from work, poor communication, poor performance and other ambiguous work events. We must learn to look for the presence of suffering in these situations. The most positive interpretations require us to immediately stop judging the person who makes an error or causes a work problem and look for the possible reason for this behaviour, since some form of suffering is likely to underlie it.

Feeling Concern for Others' Wellbeing

The process of compassion is not limited to noticing the suffering of others; the next stage is to feel empathetic concern for the person who is having a hard time. Empathetic concern means putting yourself in the place of the sufferer, seeing the situation from their perspective and feeling what they feel or imagining how you would feel in their situation. It involves feelings of solidarity towards the other, motivated by altruism rather than self-interest.

Empathy for the sufferer is a crucial part of the compassion process. Empathy connects one person to another's pain, anguish and worry and is what enables them to see things from the other person's perspective.

When people think of compassion, the first thing that comes to mind is empathy. But compassion differs from empathy in that it also involves being moved to respond to the person's suffering. Indeed, compassion engages empathy to act where pain and suffering are involved.

Compassionate Organisations: Collective Feeling

To build compassionate organisations, their members must be able to openly express their emotions and feelings, or exchange personal or work stories naturally. When organisations allow and support these practices,

feelings of empathic concern are more likely to spread and be accepted as legitimate.

Certain organisational practices and routines that encourage people to express their feelings, as well as the organisational culture, values and norms fostered at work, are key factors in building compassionate organisations. Thus, the members of an organisation that values the expression of suffering and exchange of emotional reactions to the pain of others are more likely to feel and express empathic concern for those who suffer.

Leaders also play a crucial role, since they are largely responsible for supporting and shaping the way the organisation's members act, and are therefore another key factor in enabling a collective emotional response to pain in the organisation. When the leader of an organisation openly expresses certain feelings and shows concern for its members' pain, others in the organisation are much more likely to experience feelings of compassion as legitimate and share them openly with their colleagues.

However, in organisations without such practices, culture and leadership, members must repress their personal feelings or express them privately without the endorsement of the organisation, and therefore other members of the organisation are unlikely to be influenced.

Responding: Acting to Alleviate Suffering

Finally, the process of compassion involves acting to alleviate or eliminate others' suffering. Compassion is, therefore, an empathic emotional response triggered by the suffering of another person that moves people to act in a way that will alleviate the person's anguish or make it more tolerable, thus helping the sufferer to live through it and overcome it.

The compassionate response in organisations can take at least three forms that may be related to work or home life.

- Offer emotional support: show concern through words or gestures of comfort, such as giving a hug, listening with empathy or simply asking about the person's health and wellbeing.
- Offer time and flexibility: introduce measures such as adapting work shifts or extending deadlines that allow a person who is suffering to organise their work around their personal difficulties and thus facilitate a speedy recovery.
- Offer material goods: flowers, personalised cards or financial help may be given, either as a small individual token or as a coordinated collection of money.

The response component in the compassion process is thus closely linked to prosocial or interpersonal citizenship behaviours that focus on helping or intentional actions to benefit another. However, valuable organisational behaviours such as general helping behaviour, social

support or organisational citizenship behaviour are not compassionate unless they are accompanied by the stages of noticing, sense-making and feeling in the compassion process.

Compassionate Organisations: Collective Response

Once again, organisational characteristics, culture and leadership are key to producing a collective response to suffering. For a response to be deemed collective, it must be coordinated in some way as well as legitimated and propagated by the organisation.

Thus, variations in collective response are the result of differences in key organisational characteristics, culture, leadership and values. These characteristics have the potential to help propagate and legitimate certain actions to relieve pain, as well as allowing effective coordination of these actions.

In sum, leadership and cultural values and norms that publicly endorse compassionate acts play a key role in propagating and legitimating collective response.

Compassionate Organisation Competencies and Social Architecture

Compassionate organisations achieve high levels of compassion among their members through the four key compassion competencies and six basic principles of social architecture described below (Dutton et al., 2006; Worline & Dutton, 2017). In other words, organisations can awaken compassion by developing a social architecture that supports compassion competence. Organisations that collectively notice, interpret, feel and act in an effective and customised manner to alleviate suffering are showing compassion competence.

Measuring Organisational Compassion Competence

An organisation's compassion competence can be evaluated through four dimensions: *scope*, *scale*, *speed* and *specialisation* or *customisation* of response. The degree to which people are helped to heal and to continue their work when they experience episodes of suffering depends on variations in these responses.

The *scale* of compassionate response refers to the volume of resources, time and attention that people who are suffering receive. The most effective companies match the scale to the need.

Compassionate organisations address the suffering of their members on an ongoing basis by offering the necessary volume of resources to alleviate suffering. In contrast, low compassion organisations often provide few of these resources, thus impeding recovery.

The *scope* of compassionate response refers to the breadth of resources devoted to alleviating suffering, that is, the variety of types of help provided. Some examples include money, time, work flexibility and attention from other people. For example, if an immediate family member of an employee becomes ill, they can be offered a wide range of healing resources, such as financial support, flexible working hours or care for their children.

Highly compassionate organisations operate with a wide range of resources to address an employee's suffering. In contrast, such resources are very limited in organisations with low capacity for compassion.

The *speed* of the compassionate response refers to the timeliness with which the resources are provided to the sufferer. Companies with compassion competence usually identify and allocate resources promptly and are quick to respond to employee suffering. In contrast, low compassion organisations delay care provision.

Response *customisation* refers to the levels of personalisation of the response, that is, the efficient pattern and configuration of resources to meet the particular needs and circumstances of the sufferer. Some employees will need financial help, others flexibility, and still others will need to get back to work as soon as possible. Each person and situation is different, so help must be tailored to each person's needs and circumstances without wasting resources.

Highly compassionate organisations personalise their care according to each particular situation and needs of the suffering employee. In contrast, low compassion organisations often activate a standard response that applies to everyone, regardless of the employee's actual needs.

The quality of the process is reflected in efforts to ensure that the sufferer's particular needs are met on time, the scale of the resources offered does not go beyond those needs and the scope does not go beyond resources that are useful. The organisation's culture, norms, values and leadership characteristics will determine the likelihood that members of the organisation will notice, make sense of, feel empathetic concern for and respond to pain in some way.

Compassionate Organisations: Six Principles of Social Architecture

We have already seen that compassion can develop within an organisation. Research suggests that six principles of the company's social architecture awaken compassion competence: social network, culture, roles, routines, stories told and leadership (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

An organisation's *social network* creates a social structure that ties people together, creating a flow of information, advice, emotions and feelings. The quality of the ties in networks matters. Networks contribute to compassion competence by speeding up and smoothing communication and coordination, as well as increasing the likelihood that people will pay attention and consider reports of suffering as credible.

Organisational *culture* refers to shared basic assumptions about human nature as well as shared values espoused in the organisation. An organisation's culture enables compassion competence by normalising inquiry at work and generous interpretations of suffering, drawing out empathic concern and emotional expression, and making compassionate action seem an expected part of the work environment. Humanistic values such as teamwork, collaboration, inclusion, dignity and justice are characteristic of cultures that enable greater compassion competence.

Roles are socially defined patterns of expected behaviour that go along with particular positions. When compassion is incorporated into roles, it becomes more reliable and predictable. Role making, a process of innovating by crafting new tasks, relationships and meanings into expectations, can enable compassion competence when people craft work to include more emphasis on others' wellbeing.

Routines are defined as recognisable, recurring ways that interdependent tasks are accomplished in organisations. They foster habits that guide how work gets done. Many kinds of work routines can incorporate compassion, including hiring, on-boarding, off-boarding, accounting, planning, meeting, communicating, budgeting, decision-making, conflict resolution and recognising people. When routines incorporate compassionate actions, the system becomes fast and reliable, and patterns of compassion are easily created.

Stories are focal points in systems of meaning. Stories about the organisation and about what happens in it are a key way for members to share interpretations and understandings about where they work. When people hear and share stories of compassion at work, they come to understand the whole organisation as a more compassionate place, to see their colleagues as more compassionate people, and to realise that they can be compassionate at work. Compassion stories enhance competence by building belief in compassion.

Leaders shape meaning by modelling compassion and communicating it. The members of an organisation look to them for guidance on how to interpret what is happening and also follow the models they establish. Leaders' actions enhance compassion competence when they mobilise additional resources and foster a more sustained and customised pattern of compassion.

Compassion Unfolding in Context: Levels of Context

Any discussion of compassionate organisations must take into account the way compassion flows at different levels in the organisation. In what follows, we examine what affects the interpersonal process that characterises compassion from three contextual levels: personal, relational and organisational. In their study, Dutton et al. (2014, p. 278) reveal "the patterning of compassion by showing the contextual embedding of the compassion process in roles (personal context), features of the

relationship (relational context), and characteristics of the organisation (organisational context) that affect its unfolding”.

Personal Context

The personal context of individuals participating in a compassionate experience arising in an organisation encompasses both the individual’s personal differences and organisational roles:

- Individual differences are the set of characteristics or traits that differentiate one person from another. They include, among other factors, personality and temperament traits, values, knowledge, skills and individual competencies and sociodemographic characteristics.
- Organisational roles are the set of tasks and behaviours established according to the position of the person in the organisation. These roles empower the individual and can facilitate compassion. When individuals are socialised in a role, they learn the degree and type of emotional work expected of them. If people are socialised into a role in which showing feelings or caring for others are not considered legitimate or appropriate, several threads of compassion are likely to be weak or absent altogether.

Relational Context

Compassion develops in a relational context between the person who suffers and the person who tries to respond to suffering. Within the relational context, compassion is affected by three characteristics: similarity, closeness and social power:

- Similarity is the extent to which individuals perceive that the person suffering resembles them in some specific or general aspect. When we perceive the person who suffers as similar to ourselves or as experiencing a situation similar to one we have experienced, a sense of unity is more likely to arise and compassion will spread; in other words, we are interested in helping them to achieve wellbeing.
- Closeness refers to how close or distant people are from one another in their work relationships. Relationship closeness captures the level of familiarity, intimacy and proximity between one person and another. Normally when people are close, the range of events for which they feel solidarity is wider. Close relationships provide the knowledge and emotional bonding that help us to recognise the other person’s suffering, as well as when and how to respond to that suffering in a meaningful way.
- Social power refers to the influence that one individual can exert over another. As a general rule, those with a higher status in the company tend to hide their feelings more, which makes it more difficult for the other members of the organisation to perceive their suffering and,

consequently, to help them mitigate it. Therefore, on many occasions it is difficult to feel compassion for the organisation's leaders. Although social power may hinder compassion in some situations, it may also facilitate compassion when those with more power are already sympathetic to it.

Organisational Context

Because compassion develops within the organisation, the organisational context must be analysed. There are six organisational characteristics that play an important role in the outcomes of the different phases of compassion: shared values, shared beliefs, norms, practices, structure and quality of relationships, and leaders' behaviours:

- **Shared organisational values:** these are the values members of an organisation consider to be important. Research suggests that the shared value of care is important in explaining a higher level of compassionate actions. In contrast, in organisations where people can only show their professional side at work, pain will not be expressed and therefore the compassion process will be restricted or non-existent.
- **Shared beliefs:** these refer to what the members of an organisation consider to be true. In organisations where taking an interest in colleagues' personal lives is regarded as legitimate and desirable, people will be more likely to share their pain and colleagues will feel that they can show compassion towards them.
- **Norms:** these are normative patterns of behaviour that characterise an organisation and shape both the way suffering is expressed and the response an individual can offer to this suffering.
- **Organisational practices:** these arise from the repeated patterning of actions (i.e., practices) that shape the compassion process in organisations. These practices encourage people to pay attention to particular feelings, provide frameworks for making sense of situations that involve suffering and provide guidelines to follow.
- **Structure and quality of relationships:** compassion is determined by the overall structure and quality of relationships between people in the organisation. An episode of compassion is triggered and develops in the context of the organisation's relational fabric. When ties to the network are strong, the news about someone's painful circumstances is more likely to spread.
- **Leaders' behaviours:** leaders play a symbolic and instrumental role in signalling and modelling the necessary and appropriate responses to suffering. Leaders are in a unique position to promote compassion in the workplace by, for example, treating individuals as people who also feel and demonstrate compassion in the workplace, facilitating quality relationships between employees and implementing practices that support compassion. In addition, leaders' formal power and

status give them the means to shape the other contextual factors mentioned above (shared values, shared beliefs, practices, structure and quality of relationships) that facilitate or hold back compassion.

Implications of Compassion

In the words of Dutton et al. (2014, p. 281), “compassion is a fluid, dynamic process in which both the sufferer and the focal actor [the person providing compassion] make sense of the situation and influence each other in ways that can either hinder or facilitate compassion”. However, compassion at work not only affects the person who suffers and the person who offers compassion, but goes much further, affecting the organisation as a whole. In this way, compassion affects the person who suffers, the person offering compassion, the relationship between the two parties, the people who witness the compassionate acts and the organisation as a whole benefits as a result.

The Person Who Gives Compassion (Giver)

Responding compassionately at work can lead to greater satisfaction, in the form of the satisfaction that comes from helping others, and is associated with a more prosocial identity, that is, seeing oneself as a caring person (Grant et al., 2008).

The Person Who Suffers (Sufferer)

Compassion received from another person shapes the sufferer’s sense-making about themselves (e.g., by seeing themselves as more capable), their peers (e.g., by seeing their peers as more humane) and their organisation (e.g., by seeing the organisation as caring); in all cases, interpretations become more positive. Receiving compassion in the workplace not only alleviates the suffering felt at the time, but also helps people to recover from future setbacks more quickly and effectively.

Witnesses and Bystanders

Witnessing compassionate episodes in the organisation helps to make people more resilient. It can also increase feelings of pride in the way the people in an organisation behave and can promote elevation, encouraging people to act more for the common good.

Relationships between the Person Who Shows Compassion and the Person Who Suffers

Studies indicate that compassion connects people psychologically, resulting in a stronger connection between co-workers. The theory suggests that this connection may arise, in part, because compassion breeds trust.

Collective Benefits

Organisational compassion not only facilitates healing and speedier recovery from suffering, but also yields collective benefits like shared positive emotions, greater collective commitment, lower turnover rates, customer retention and even better financial performance (Lilius et al., 2008). Moreover, research has revealed patterns of compassion spirals, where those on the receiving end of compassion are subsequently better able or more likely to direct caring and supportive behaviours towards others. Compassion has also been proposed as a collective capacity that cannot easily be substituted or imitated and is therefore particularly advantageous over the long term (Guinot et al., 2020).

Compassion Practices

Below we provide some examples of practices that can help to foster compassion in organisations. Acting compassionately is not about big gestures or great sacrifices; on the contrary, very often a simple action can make all the difference:

- Hold meetings where members are encouraged to talk not only about their work progress, but also about how they feel about their work and about non-work issues. This mechanism allows members to openly disclose and speak about their pain, as well as share their emotional responses to the suffering of their colleagues. As members develop a shared appreciation and acceptance of pain and the emotional reactions it evokes, collective feelings of compassion are likely to be generated and sustained.
- Adapt the physical architecture of departments so the status of their members is clear and easy to recognise. For example, in an open-plan unit, members can see and interact with each other. By contrast, architectures such as closed offices, perhaps in different buildings, are isolating and hinder the process of compassion.
- Compassion can emerge and be sustained without formal planning, or in a formal and organised way. An example of a formally established and helpful practice is an official employee assistance programme that allows employees to donate unused holidays and personal days to others who need time off to deal with painful or difficult circumstances.

Conclusions

Suffering, and the compassion that helps address suffering directly, is one of the most important ideas for business today: “When seeking to build high-performing organizations that meet the challenges of a twenty-first-century work environment, compassion matters more than most people recognize” (Dutton & Worline, 2017, p.13).

However, we must bear in mind that some people do not want others to know they are suffering and do not want help, or perhaps the type of help being offered. In these cases, compassion can also have a negative effect on the sufferer. Research on social support at work, for example, has identified actions that are designed to help others, but they may not be desired; such intention to help may actually be harmful. This chapter has attempted to clarify these issues by providing guidelines and relevant information to fully understand the various processes of compassion and enable organisations and individuals to act appropriately.

By understanding the mechanisms of compassion, we can learn how this interpersonal way of caring for one another not only reduces the costs associated with personal suffering but also brings many other benefits at all levels (personal, relational and organisational). It nurtures positive emotions and enhances levels of commitment to co-workers and the organisation as a whole.

In this way, compassionate organisations strengthen the values of dignity, respect and the common good and cultivate critical relational skills by enhancing emotional sensitivity and building organisational resources of pride, trust, motivation and connection.

Compassionate organisations are more humane organisations with better workplace relations. Organisations may take steps to institutionalise compassion by implementing structures and programmes aimed to trigger compassion more efficiently and effectively in order to reduce suffering.

Having studied the framework for understanding how the social architecture of an organisation can awaken compassionate competence, organisations and their members should lower organisational barriers to noticing co-workers' suffering, encourage generous interpretations, increase empathy and act to alleviate the suffering as well as strengthen the contextual enablers of compassion.

In conclusion, while research on compassionate organisations is advancing at a breakneck pace, it is not given the weight it deserves in business schools. Since compassion in organisations must be normalised to foster more well-rounded workers as well as yield better organisational results, understanding how to build and maintain a compassionate organisation should be a priority for anyone wishing to dedicate their professional career to leading people and organisations, as well as for human resources and other managers in the organisations.

Perhaps it is time to give compassion the value it deserves.

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