

Leading with Compassion Has Research-Backed Benefits

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Summary. How do organizations earn employee loyalty? Lasting relationships aren't merely achieved through compensation and material perks; they're nurtured by human connection and compassion. Research has shown the benefits of being compassionate on health and... [more](#)

With burnout rising, employee engagement falling, and people continuing to quit their jobs even in the midst of economic uncertainty, organizations must sharpen their focus on employee

retention. While compensation and benefits are an important part of retaining employees, the source of lasting loyalty to an organization is typically something deeper.



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Think of someone who was a mentor in your life — perhaps when you were young or early on in your career. They saw you for who you really are and selflessly gave you the help you needed. If that person were to text you with an urgent plea for help, would you drop everything for them? Of course you would. That's loyalty. Loyalty is not something you can buy; it is a deep connection in which you feel valued and supported. They have your back. It is rooted in human connection, and it is priceless.

Recent evidence supports this. Contrary to what many employers currently believe, the recent wave of employee attrition has less to do with economics and more to do with relationships (or lack thereof). The data support that employees' decisions to stay in a job largely come from a sense of belonging, feeling valued by their leaders, and having caring and trusting colleagues. Conversely, employees are more likely to quit when their work relationships are merely transactional. So, how do leaders foster more meaningful relationships in organizations and inspire loyalty? In a word: compassion.

The Science of Compassion and Serving Others

Researchers define compassion as an emotional response to another's struggles that involves an authentic desire to help. It's distinctly different from a closely related word: empathy. Empathy is the sensing, feeling, detecting, and understanding

component, but compassion goes beyond empathy by also taking responsive action. Think of it like this: empathy + action = compassion. When a colleague is going through a difficult time, meeting them in their time of need with compassion can be something they will never forget, and it deepens relationships.

In our research, we curate empirical evidence on topics that people often relegate to the domain of “soft skills.” We examine moral/ethical or emotional/sentimental concepts, like compassion, through the lens of science. In the health care industry, for example, our results show that compassion matters not only in meaningful ways, but also in *measurable* ways. One finding was especially striking: Among health care workers, showing more compassion is associated with less burnout. That is, compassion can have powerful beneficial effects not only for the receiver of compassion, but also for the giver.

Our latest research extended these findings beyond the health care industry to everybody, everywhere. In our book, we examined the impact of kindness on one’s own health. Rigorous research supports that being a giving, others-focused person is linked with a longer life, and can buffer the effects of stressful events on mortality risk. Specifically, kindness can reduce risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including counteracting high blood pressure. Kindness and compassion may also help us maintain vitality and cognitive function as we age. Focusing on selfless acts has even been shown to have pain-relieving effects. Numerous studies show that selfless giving to others is associated with happiness, well-being, resilience and resistance to burnout, fewer depression symptoms, and better relationships.

But what about professional success? The old-school theory that “looking out for number one” will get you the corner office is not actually supported by the evidence. In a longitudinal study from the University of California-Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, the authors used validated research scales to assess the

personality traits of people entering the labor market. After 14 years, and controlling for demographic and corporate factors, those who were selfish, aggressive, and manipulative were less likely to move up the ranks. Instead, those who were generous and agreeable were more likely to be promoted to a position of power. A University of South Carolina study that surveyed representative samples of the general population in the U.S. and European countries across a wide range of income levels found that people with “prosocial motivation” — i.e., those who are kinder and more generous — tend to have higher incomes compared to selfish people. A Canadian study assessed the personality traits of nearly 3,000 kindergarteners and followed them for ~30 years. They found that among men, independent of IQ and family background, those who showed the most kindness to others in kindergarten had significantly higher annual earnings compared to those who were aggressive or oppositional.

Right now you may be thinking: *Since kindness is a great way to get ahead, I'll fetch coffee and write birthday cards for everyone at work, and watch my star rise!* Not so fast. Research also shows that motives do matter. If you display kindness or compassion to others for strategic or selfish reasons, you might as well forget it. Research shows that you have to be authentically altruistic — not strategically helping others or forced into it — or it won't work. Instead of thinking “give-to-get,” the data supports a mindset of “live-to-give.”

Leading with Compassion

So if serving others can be a “wonder drug” for your health, well-being, and career, can it also work for your organization? Sure, compassionate leadership sounds like the *right* thing to do, but is it also the *smart* thing to do? According to research, yes.

Compassion is a vital component of effective leadership. People's brains respond more positively to leaders who show compassion, as demonstrated by neuroimaging research. Creating a compassionate culture has been linked with lower employee emotional exhaustion (one of the elements of burnout) as well as lower employee absenteeism from work.

Author Simon Sinek describes that when leaders focus less on being "in charge" and more on taking care of those who are in their charge, that's a sure sign of a compassionate leader. Numerous studies show that when leaders are primarily focused on the well-being of their employees, this is a strong predictor of employee job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, loyalty and trust in the organization, and retention. It also has been linked with improved employee job performance (by boosting employee motivation), and better team performance.

Evidence-based Ways Managers Can Improve Their Compassion Skills

So far, we've shared the "why" for compassion, but what about the "how?" Here, we offer a seven-part, evidence-based "prescription" for how leaders and managers can effectively grow their compassion skills at work (and everywhere else):

Start small. Research supports that being more compassionate is not a major time commitment, so being "too busy" should not be an excuse. In fact, a Johns Hopkins study found that giving just 40 seconds of compassion can lower another person's anxiety in a measurable way. Further, a University of Pennsylvania study found that spending time serving others increases one's subjective sense of time "affluence" — the feeling that we have plenty of time and are not in a hurry.

Be thankful. You may have heard that an "attitude of gratitude" is good for you, but why? Meta-analytic research shows that gratitude makes us more others-focused and motivates us to serve others. A University of Toronto study found that in everyday life

(e.g., the workplace) we have, on average, nine unique opportunities for compassion every day. Being thankful keeps our eyes open to these opportunities.

Be purposeful. We need to ask the right questions and avoid asking the wrong ones. When a colleague is struggling on a personal level, ask *how* you can support them. Instead of yes or no questions like “Do you need help?” or “Is there anything I can do?” (which often sound like an invitation to say “no”), try asking “What can I do to be helpful to you today?”, “What can I do to make your day a little better?”, or “What can I take off your plate today?” You’ll be surprised how often asking the right questions in the right way will give you something actionable. One person one of us spoke with told us about the CEO at the big Silicon Valley technology company they used to work for. That CEO had a very intentional practice: Whenever he found out an employee was facing a difficult time like the loss of a family member or a scary diagnosis, he would drop everything and call that employee immediately to ask how he could support them. Again, ask not “if” but “how.”

Find common ground. “Parochial empathy” — i.e., being extra kind and compassionate with “our own” people who are similar to us — can reduce our compassionate behavior on balance overall because we sometimes end up treating others (what researchers call the “out-group”) a little worse. It also closes people off to a lot of opportunities to help and serve (think about your nine empathy opportunities per day). Try going out of your way to show compassion to colleagues outside of your immediate social circle, expanding your “in-group” as much as possible. At work, we’re all on the same team.

See it. Celebrate compassion in your organization. When an employee goes “above and beyond” to help someone else, let people know. Research shows that having a clear line of sight into others’ goodness helps us realize that people in general are far more compassionate than we sometimes realize, and it inspires us

to follow suit.

Elevate. Elevation is the state of emotional uplift that we feel when we bear witness to another person’s compassion, moral excellence, or heroism. Elevation motivates us to be more compassionate and altruistic ourselves. But it cuts both ways; it only takes one toxic “it’s all about me” person in the room to drag everyone else down. Research confirms that both compassion and rudeness are contagious. Therefore, be mindful that your behavior — and specifically your compassion (or lack thereof) — has a direct impact on others.

Know your power. Maybe you’ve asked (or been asked) in an interview: “What’s your superpower?” Imagine if compassion was your superpower. What could your career look like? What could your life look like? If you think it’s not possible for you, don’t get down on yourself or dismiss the idea. Know this: Contrary to popular belief, robust research shows that change is possible. Thankfully, all of us have the power to get better at compassion for others if we keep a growth mindset and are very intentional about it. We are all works in progress, but if we believe we can get better at empathy and compassion, we will.

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For better talent retention and organizational performance, especially in challenging times, managers should recognize that compassion is not merely a “nice to have.” Rather, it’s an evidence-based skill that is integral to leading effectively and holding teams together. Compassion not only belongs in the art of leadership; robust research shows that compassion also belongs in the *science* of leadership.

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