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Tuning in, turning outward: Cultivating compassionate leadership in a crisis

Four qualities—awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion— are critical for business leaders to care for people in crisis and set the stage for business recovery.

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What are you feeling?

It is the simplest of questions, but in the passing of just a few brief months it has left countless people on this planet stammering for an answer. The disorienting effects of COVID-19 on our daily lives, on global health, and on economic activity have so emotionally overwhelmed people that forming a response to even such an innocent query triggers an overload that stymies articulation. No wonder that in a recent survey almost half of respondents stated that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health.[1]

A "landscape-scale crisis" such as COVID-19 strips leadership back to its most fundamental element: making a positive difference in people's lives.[2] As our research has outlined, an imperative for leaders in such times is to demonstrate compassionate leadership and to make dealing with the unfolding human tragedy the first priority.

Numerous studies show that in a business-as-usual environment, compassionate leaders perform better and foster more loyalty and engagement by their teams.[3] However, compassion becomes especially critical during a crisis.[4] While a crisis's early days might seem like the time for leaders to put their head down and exhibit control, it is just as critical to tune in to personal fears and anxieties so as to be able to turn outward to help employees and colleagues grapple with their own reactions. This isn't easy, but this introspection and projection of care is critical for connecting and dealing with people's immediate needs and setting the stage for business recovery.

The psychological and business cost of landscape-scale crises

A crisis can trigger a range of physiological and psychological responses that include heightened sensitivity and distress. Landscape-scale crises can also create mass-scale trauma responses, as collective fears and existential threats disrupt equilibrium and social isolation weakens bonds that normally provide emotional support. Collective panic can prompt a "flight and affiliation" response in which people seek familiar places and contacts.[5] Earlier traumas resurface. The lost sense of security and normalcy can trigger grief, and with it feelings of shock, denial, anger, and depression.

In such circumstances demonstrating highly visible and caring leadership becomes even more important. Paradoxically, this is also when leaders are predisposed to busy themselves with urgent meetings and operational issues, triggered in part by the situation and exacerbated by their own underlying fears of vulnerability that shift them toward self-preservation and a desire to maintain control.[6]

The inability to deal with stress and trauma can exact a human toll on individuals and portend dire consequences for organizations. An organization mired in collective fear and focused on control will not unleash the creativity and innovation necessary to navigate a crisis and emerge healthy on the other side.

We find that four qualities can mitigate these natural tendencies and help leaders find the compassionate

[1] KFF Health Tracking Poll—Early April 2020: The Impact Of Coronavirus On Life In America, Kaiser Family Foundation, kff.org.

[2] Arnold Howitt and Herman B. Leonard, "Against desperate peril: High performance in emergency preparation and response," *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response, and Recovery in the Global Arena*, Deborah E. Gibbons, ed., Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007.

[3] Jane E. Dutton, Ashley E. Hardin, and Kristina M. Workman, "Compassion at work," *Annual Review Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2014, pp. 277–304; Jacoba M. Lilius, et al, "Understanding compassion capability," Human Relations, Volume 64, Number 7, 2011, pp. 873–99; Paquita C. De Zulueta, "Developing Compassionate Leadership in Health Care: An Integrative Review," *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, Volume 8, 2016, pp. 1–10.

[4] Jane E. Dutton, et al, "Leading in times of trauma," *Harvard Business Review*, Volume 80, Number 1, 2002, pp. 54–61; Edward H. Powley and Sandy Kristin Piderit, "Tending wounds: Elements of the organizational healing process," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Volume 44, Number 1, 2008, pp. 134–49.

[5] Anthony Mawson, "Understanding mass panic and other collective responses to threat and disaster," *Psychiatry*, Volume 68, Number 2, 2005, pp. 95–13.

[6] Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, "The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory," *Public Self and Private Self*, New York, NY: Springer, 1986, pp. 189–212; Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, "Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 29, Academic Press, 1997, pp. 61–139.

A first step to effectively tune inward is to create time and space for self-connection and self-awareness.

voice to manage in crisis and shepherd their organization into a postcrisis next normal. Start by creating space to attain a keener *awareness* of what is going on within and around you. Be bold in exhibiting *vulnerability* by lowering your guard and confronting what is unfolding. Demonstrate *empathy* to better tap the emotions others are feeling, and act with *compassion* to make individuals and groups feel genuinely cared for. Cultivate these qualities in a balanced way by first tuning inward to understand and integrate your own emotions and fears, and then turning outward to alleviate pain, support others, and, over time, enable people and the business to recover.

Tuning in

As a crisis strikes, a leader's reflex is typically to first stabilize the threat. This includes setting up a crisis-response infrastructure, such as a network of teams, elevating the right leaders into critical roles, and developing scenarios to anticipate the crisis's evolution. At the same time, it is critical to attend to yourself and your organization. Once the crisis's initial shock has been absorbed, it's essential to accept and acknowledge the reactive tendencies that unfold within ourselves and others, and to care for them.

To thoughtfully and skillfully recognize and embrace the emotions and reactions to trauma that might surface, a compassionate leader must allow them

to be felt.[7] Unless we recognize our own natural human response to a crisis and process these strong emotions, we won't have the capacity to grasp these reactions from others we seek to help. In other words, leaders must first relate to and help themselves before they can do the same for others.

Some practices can help:

Uncover and integrate what you feel

A bias toward control may be a natural response to crisis, but it risks shutting off awareness of one's own and others' feelings and emotional needs. A first step to effectively tune inward is to create time and space for self-connection and self-awareness.

A simple practice during these times is to engage in deep and intentional breathing. Deep breathing slows the heart rate and restores the body to a calmer and composed state. Even a few deep breaths can suffice. Take a moment for deep breathing when you notice rising fear or stress, and likewise before making important decisions. Adopt daily rituals for restoration, deep breathing and emotional self-connection by committing to a recurring time of day and specific location, for example, first thing in the morning. Silence your phone to stifle distraction.

You may notice bodily sensations and feel emotions more acutely. Try to name these feelings. Many leaders have "learned" to suppress emotions on

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[7] Richard J. Davidson, et al, "Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, Volume 65, Number 4, 2003, pp. 564–70; Neal M. Ashkanasy and Peter J. Jordan, "Emotional intelligence, emotional self-awareness, and team effectiveness," *Linking Emotional Intelligence and Performance at Work: Current Research Evidence with Individuals and Groups*, 2006, pp. 145–63.

the job and may be unaccustomed to noticing and articulating feelings in a nuanced way. But doing so can help to internalize and experience more fully what is going on and surface the strong emotions that naturally result from crisis. This emotional self-contact and regulation lays a foundation for renewal and healing. By intentionally pausing activity flow and restoring contact with our inner resources you create more room to make grounded choices, break habits of mind and behavior, and bring genuine presence to the workday's complex tasks and interactions.

Practice gratitude daily

Another simple practice is to share a sense of gratitude. Like getting enough sleep, exercising, and eating well to counter stress and fatigue, gratitude has been shown to improve mental health, renew energy and hope, and encourage self-improvement.[8]

Consider three ways to cultivate a daily gratitude practice:

— Keep a gratitude journal. Spend five minutes each day writing down three things that you're grateful for in your life right now.

— Write a gratitude letter to someone. Sending the letter is optional. The mere act of putting positive thoughts on paper can help shift your cognitive processes positively.

— Commit to expressing gratitude to someone at least once a day.

Open yourself to others' expressions of care

Finally, open yourself up to others' empathy and compassion. Sharing your emotions in response to caring words and acts takes vulnerability. But it will help maintain your own emotional stability and build up a close support network that is essential, especially during turbulent times.

Leaders who experience anxiety and emotional blockages may find it helpful to talk to others about their experiences. As with deep breathing, merely listing emotions can help regulate nervous systems, ease anxiety and tension, and allow individuals to activate their logical thought processes.[9] Sharing deeper feelings with those a leader trusts can help to process and overcome blockages and lay the foundation for cultivating authenticity, trust, and compassionate leadership as the leader turns outward to connect with the broader organization.

Turning outward to connect with others

Tuning into yourself will improve your ability to listen to others, alleviate their fear and anxiety, and enable them to move forward. Awareness of what others are feeling, and role modeling vulnerability, empathy, and compassion during a crisis has been shown to lower stress and limit the adverse physical symptoms of team members, while also improving team goal achievement and productivity.[10]

As the crisis evolves,[11] compassionate leadership entails bringing a community together so that it can move forward in the following ways:

— Develop perspective on the situation and derive meaning from it.

— Foster belonging and inclusion to unify the organization.

— Take care of people through compassionate acts.

— Reimagine and plan its postcrisis future.

Develop perspective, derive meaning

Communities need moments to breathe, and to give a name to what they are experiencing before they can create meaning from it as they move

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8 Christina N. Armenta, Megan M. Fritz, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Functions of positive emotions: Gratitude as a motivator of self-improvement and positive change," *Emotion Review*, Volume 9, Number, 2017, pp. 183–90; Y. Joel Wong, et al, "Does gratitude writing improve the mental health of psychotherapy clients? Evidence from a randomized controlled trial," *Psychotherapy Research*, Volume 28, Number 2, 2018, pp. 192–202.

9 Matthew D. Lieberman, et al, "Putting feelings into words," *Psychological Science*, Volume 18, Number 5, 2007, pp. 421–28.

10 Brent A. Scott, "A daily investigation of the role of manager empathy on employee well-being." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Volume 113, Number 2, 2010, pp. 127–40.

11 Kevin Sneader and Shubham Singhal, "Beyond coronavirus: The path to the next normal," March 2020, McKinsey.com.

on. Leaders can set the tone for such healing by expressing vulnerability and sharing personal fears, concerns, and uncertainties. Another simple practice is acknowledging that no leader has all the answers. Authenticity is paramount, lest the organization pick up on the dissonance between the leader's words and their feelings and tune out. Skepticism and loss of credibility will follow.[12] Maintain a tempered and deliberate tone and remain grounded even as you reserve opportunities for others to express their emotions.

When such vulnerability is present others will have space to share their experiences as well. That kind of chemistry will make it easier to establish this level of openness in day-to-day interactions.

When people exhibit fear and a desire for protection and self-preservation, compassionate leaders validate those feelings as normal. Again, naming emotions reduces tension and opens the door to addressing them. Provide safe workplace forums for stakeholders to express emotions. It will help individuals move past pain, stress, and anxiety, and refocus on their work and the organization's mission.

For example, during the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, New York City Fire Department Chief Joseph Pfeifer recalls another chief climbing atop a charred firetruck and motioning firefighters to gather around it. "I want you to take off your helmets," the chief said. Incredulous looks raced through the group—the helmet was a part of these first responders' identity, and removing it normally only occurred at a shift's end. But the chief continued: "We lost a lot of people today. This calls for a moment of silence."

The simple gesture put voice to what the firefighters were feeling. When the chief spoke again, he said, "Let's put our helmets back on. We have more lives to save." Pfeifer remembers the meeting ending with the group even more deeply aligned around their mission.

Stepping back to gain perspective is a practice as useful for organizations as it is for individuals. Once people have had a chance to share their raw emotional experience and check in with one another on their circumstances and losses, the ability to then tap into the generosity, wisdom, and strength of the team as a whole can help provide vision and resources to manage and perhaps ease or temper people's sense of risk and uncertainty.

Foster belonging and inclusion

Being part of one and the same organization is especially important in crises that can resurface past traumas. People can often feel that they are in the same storm with others yet not feel that they are in the same boat.

Leaders play a crucial role in making people feel heard and included, to enable all individuals to freely express themselves, foster an environment of psychological safety in which all feel joined together in the face of crisis. One way is to receive people with unconditional positive regard, withholding judgment and welcoming diversity of self-expression. This gesture of solidarity is why some leaders wear the familiar clothing or uniforms or equipment of communities hard hit by adversity. A true feeling of inclusivity, trust, and belonging among coworkers helps reduce mental health issues and boosts worker commitment.[13]

After the 2019 attacks on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, for example, the country's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, wore a hijab as she walked throughout the community, comforting people and hugging victims' family members. Her decision to put on the religiously symbolic garment of those targeted sent a unifying message that all were part of the same community.

Take care of people

We mirror the behaviors of those around us,[14] and leaders are uniquely positioned to serve as influential role models for compassionate acts

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[12] Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, *The mind of the leader: How to lead yourself, your people, and your organization for extraordinary results*, Harvard Business Press, 2018.

[13] *2019 State of Workplace Empathy*, Businessolver, businessolver.com.

[14] Tanya L. Chartrand and John A. Bargh, *"Self and Motivation: Emerging Psychological Perspectives,"* American Psychological Association, 2002, pp. 13–41.

The goal is to refocus individuals away from trauma and toward a better future for themselves and the business as well.

and demonstrating care for people's basic needs. Showing interest in employees' feelings can be key to recovery, especially if such acts are visible and leaders cascade them throughout the organization.[15] Checking in on individuals and their families, expressing gratitude either with words or small tokens of appreciation, setting up a company-wide thank-a-thon, or publicly recognizing compassionate acts taken by others are all gestures leaders can take to show care for those around them. Leaders should also encourage and raise the profile of compassionate acts on the part of employees to further foster a mutually supportive community.

Back up these acts with support. Practical gestures include extended leave, additional sick days, and expanded health coverage. It is difficult to ask employees preoccupied with their basic needs to focus on productivity. Alleviating these basic concerns for people will free up their capacity to keep contributing to your organization's purpose and strategic objectives.

Reimagine a postcrisis next normal
In an environment in which people share grief, anxieties, and fears, demonstrate vulnerability and come together as one community, leaders have a great opportunity to foster an organizational culture filled with mutual acceptance, intimacy, and hope.

They can also channel this energy to reimagining the organization. Pairing vulnerability with confidence in the next normal is critical to help people transition from states of anger or denial into working together to build a desirable future. Leaders are uniquely positioned to ignite hope and create the image of a future organization people are excited to be a part of.[16]

Actively engage in open dialogue with various stakeholders to share their diagnoses of the crisis and their prognoses of how to emerge from it into a reimagined next normal. Encourage others to do the same. Sharing individual experiences and perspectives not only paves the way toward collective sensemaking,[17] but also reignites creative energy among employees. The goal is to refocus individuals away from trauma and toward a better future for themselves and the business as well.

This can be accomplished by reconnecting people to their shared organizational values, identity, and purpose. In town halls and group conversations leaders should pose questions about what the organization stands for, as well as what it should continue to do or stop doing in the future (see sidebar, "How to explore an organization's past, present, and future").

[15] Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*, Harvard Business Press, 2005.
[16] Brett Luthans, Kyle Luthans, and Steve Norman, "The proposed contagion effect of hopeful leaders on the resiliency of employees and organizations," *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, Volume 12, Number 2, 2005, pp 55–64.
[17] Marlys K. Christianson, Maria T. Farkas, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and Karl E. Weick, "Learning through rare events: Significant interruptions at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum," *Organization Science*, Volume 20, Number 5, 2009, pp 846–60.

How to explore an organization's past, present, and future

Example questions[1]:

— Past:

- What have we stopped or paused but is core to who we are and will want to return to?

- What do we want to fully let go of (values, activities, products)?

- What will we happily leave behind versus what will be difficult for us?

— Present:

- What do we want to continue as-is because it is working?

- Which values are serving us well?

- What about our organization will continue but change and improve permanently as we move into the next normal?

— Future:

- What do we want to stand for? What is our purpose?

- What kind of an organization do we want to become?

- What do we want to create that is new—new practices or ways of working, new norms that are emerging?

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[1] Adapted from Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, "Leadership in a (permanent) crisis," *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2009, hbr.com.

Case in point: after JetBlue suffered an operational crisis as snowstorm and internet issues stranded thousands of customers and employees on Valentine's Day in 2007, David Neeleman, the chief executive at the time, used the crisis to launch a complete overhaul of the company's operations and customer-service approach, including pioneering a customer bill of rights to notify and compensate passengers affected by delays and cancellations.

The overwhelming effects of a crisis strip leadership back to its most fundamental element: making a positive difference in people's lives. By tuning inward to cultivate awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion, and then turning outward to comfort and address the concerns of stakeholders, leaders can exhibit individual care, build resilience, and position their organizations to positively reimagine a postcrisis future.