

# CONNECTIVE LEADERSHIP – COMPASSION IN ACTION

*Is there room for more connectivity and compassion in a practical leadership context? Why bother with them anyway? And why is developing such soft skills so hard?*

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**MONDAY NOVEMBER 9, 2009**

## 1. Connective leaders – a new breed?

**The public profile of a good leader?**

- Tough
- Decisive
- Hard-nosed
- Ultra-rational
- Results-driven
- Bottom-line focused

Most leaders are still conditioned to lead with their heads, not their hearts – the public profile of a powerful leader espoused in the press still routinely applauds attributes like tough, decisive, hard-nosed, quick-to-judge, ultra-rational and results-driven.

Here are some impressions I've picked up around various organisations. Perhaps you have different ones. I hope you do. I think they beg the question – *has leadership lost its way....?* Look around. What do we see in organisations today?

**Has leadership lost its way?**

- Power, position, ego
- Business before benevolence
- Compliance & control
- Alienation, anger, apathy
- Disengagement
- Profit over people
- Caustic conversations
- Toxic workplaces
- People in pain

Bottom line management. The pursuit of profitability, power, position and significance over the values of compassion, caring and connection. Bullying. Dictatorial attitudes. Decisions made on pure financial terms that appear to be taken as unshakeable, self-evident and incontrovertible truth. Business rationalism rules in a way that seems to preclude other values. Right action is based on a set of economic values that are not necessarily, *or is that rarely*, consistent with humane or compassionate ones. Organisations program leaders to put business before benevolence, profits and procedures before people – and we make everyone revolve around the system, often even at the expense of logic and frequently at a cost to caring and basic humanity.

It's a pretty bleak picture I have painted – on purpose. Yet this is changing.

We're experiencing a quiet, emotional revolution. Since the publication of Daniel Goleman's ground-breaking works, more leaders are now concerned with their level of Emotional Intelligence – their ability to 'tune into themselves' and be more mindful of the impact their thinking, feelings, moods and behaviour have on people they lead. They're interested in a more connective style – in leading through feelings.

**What is Emotional Intelligence?**

- Knowing our Feelings
- Managing our Moods
- Choosing how we Act
- Curbing Disruptive Feelings
- Resonant Relationships
- Communicating how we Feel and, the most critical element...
- Connecting with Others - Empathy'

Of course, many truly great leaders have always had the confidence and courage to cultivate connectivity and compassion. It may be human kindness but it also makes practical business sense too. If you want people to take committed action and put in a superior performance, you have to connect with their feelings first. People can't focus and do good work if they're distracted by strong negative emotions. It's at the 'feelings' level where many performance and productivity problems lie. And to do something about it, you need to connect with feelings. This takes emotional intelligence (EI)...

Connective leaders are emotionally intelligent. It's a given. They always make themselves approachable. They use empathy and acknowledgement to maintain relationships. They're able to resonate with the moods or emotions of their teams, then act in ways that are emotionally effective – that bring out the best in others. Even faced with difficult situations, when hard

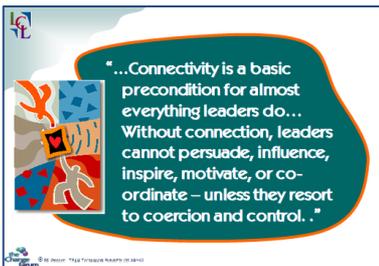


messages have to be delivered, they stay connected with other's feelings and keep one eye on the relationship. Here's some ways to spot a connective leader. Have you seen many around your workplace?

- Connective leaders are 'in-tune' feeling-wise. What they say and do resonates – and they always have the time to engage in connective conversations with others.
- Connective leaders manage their moods. They know feelings are catchy and they use positive emotions to inspire, not infect others with negative, de-motivating feelings
- Connective leaders put people before procedures. They're willing to set aside or change outmoded or emotionally dissonant rules and regulations for the greater good. They also show sincere, heartfelt consideration and genuinely care for the well-being of others. They have a humane side that puts others needs before theirs
- Connective leaders are mindful. They're awake to their own feelings, aware of the impact they have on others and attentive and sympathetic to the needs of others. They're also hopeful. They move others passionately and purposefully with a shared vision that plays on the positive, energising and renewing power of hope
- Connective leaders have the courage to say what they feel. They convey feelings, fears, even doubts authentically, which builds trust and makes them approachable. They engage others in frank, open dialogue. They speak candidly with truth, humility, respect and conviction – and make it safe for others to do so too
- Connective leaders read what other people are thinking and feeling. This empathetic connection keeps them in touch and in tune. And through this, connective leaders move people – powerfully, passionately, purposefully. They quietly inspire.

*And above all – connective leaders are compassionate... They act out compassion. They don't just pay lip service to a cause, they make a promise, act on it and keep it.*

## 2. Making the Most of Connective Moments



Connectivity is a basic precondition for almost everything leaders do with people. Without connection, leaders cannot persuade, influence, inspire, motivate or co-ordinate – unless they resort to coercion and control. And connectivity is compassion in action. It means making the most of connective moments.

*Why do connective moments matter?* We spend so much time doing things automatically at work, at home, in life – we don't stop enough to appreciate, reflect, question, challenge or take a fresh look at what's going on around us. Many leaders are simply not present for their staff. We don't pause the moment enough to see what's essential or what really matters. At work, most managers pay lip service to how important relationships are in getting things done yet spend more time on technical, operational issues.

*"Buddhist masters always have emphasised that each moment of life is precious. In any given moment, we can allow life to pass us or we can be mindful of what's most essential. Too often we find ourselves hurrying to grab our coffee, commute to work, and get to a meeting, rarely pausing to take a deep breath and seriously consider how we spend the limited number of precious moments that we have. When we're aware and awake in a given moment, we have the capacity to make that moment extraordinary."* (Lorne Ladner *The Lost Art of Compassion* p. 3)



**Connective Moments...**

- Reduces stress hormones like cortisol
- Emits hormones that promote trust, bonding & contact
- Stimulate dopamine that enhances attention & pleasure & ...
- Serotonin that reduces fear & worry
- The effect? Healing, consoling, restoring



From: A study by Hallowell quoted in Peter Frost Toxic Emotions at Work p. 32  
© Dr. Hallowell "The Human Moment at Work"

Connective moments can be thought of as the particles that make up culture. And their effect on physiology is profound and life-affirming. They reduce stress hormones like cortisol, encourage us to release hormones that promote trust; stimulate dopamine that enhances and serotonin that reduces fear and worry. Edward Hallowell, practising psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, says: *"The human moment has two prerequisites: people's physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention. A human doesn't have to be emotionally draining or personally revealing. A five-minute conversation can be a perfectly meaningful human moment. To make the human moment work, you have to set aside what you're doing, and focus on the person you're with. Usually when you do that, the other person will feel the energy and respond in kind. The absence of the human moment in an organization can wreak havoc. Good people leave. Those who remain are unhappy."* (Edward Hallowell *"The Human Moment at Work"* HBR Jan-Feb 1999)

Recollect a few connective EI moment you've witnessed around your workplace. Who was involved? What was the situation? What did they say or do to connect? What was the outcome?

### 3. The Four Essences for Connectivity

**Essences of Connectivity...**

- Mindfulness
- Resonance
- Empathy
- Compassion



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What is connectivity? There are four 'essences' that really count in cultivating it: *mindfulness, resonance, empathy and compassion.*

**1. Mindfulness** is not a practice you encounter much in the busy-ness and distraction of work but it's key to connectivity. It means being awake, aware, and alert to ourselves. We define mindfulness as opening up fully to what is happening inside you (your mental and emotional states) and relating that to what is going on outside you, including of course the impact your inner-states have on the people around you.

**Mindfulness means...**

- Awake, aware, alert
- Being present
- Focused attention
- Listening to ourselves
- Minding our impact



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It's being expansively present and attentive to what is happening in the moment – and "cultivating the capacity for mindfulness is essential for sustaining good leadership." (Boyatzis & McKee *Resonant Leadership* p. 114)

When we're mindful, we can exercise self-control and make better choices. When we're more self-aware, we can be more empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others. Mindfulness also relates to both western psychology and Buddhist view of 'even-mindedness' – an emotional state of equanimity absolutely essential in cultivating connectivity and compassion and maintaining emotional and mental balance.



**2. Resonance.** A big body of brain research proves leaders act as emotional amplifiers for people around them. Because emotions are catchy, a leader's moods deeply influence the way other people feel about work, the workplace climate and ultimately performance and productivity. Buoyant moods boost performance. But when people feel down, concentration lapses, mistakes increase and work is likely to be less productive than when they feel good and work at their best.

Resonant leadership is when you tune in to the feelings of staff. People feel acknowledged, understood, cared for – which can help them regain energy and focus, get them out of the doldrums and make work more meaningful. Leaders who emanate negative emotions cause dissatisfaction, demoralise and sap the spirit of their staff. Managers who come to work constantly cranky or get exasperated at the drop of a hat can create toxic climates if this continues over time.

**Empathy - Read your Emotional Radar**

- Keen awareness of other's feelings
- Getting inside someone else's skin
- Seeing from behind their eyeballs
- Sensing how they're reacting

Empathy is at the core of connective conversations  
Empathy is "a balm for anger"

**3. Empathy** is an innate ability we all have to think and feel ourselves into the emotional state and perspective of someone else. By taking in facial expressions, body language or tone of voice, we get an immediate sense of how they feel. It's a keen awareness of other people's needs, feelings and thoughts – being able to see reality the way they see it and to sense how they're reacting.

It means being able to get out of my skin and imagine what it feels like to be in your skin, walking in your shoes and seeing the world through your eyes. It's about being able to pick up on where someone else is coming from feelings-wise (even if I don't agree with it). It's empathy that makes connective leadership possible. It's not just a sentimental fiction. It's a real brain function. Spindle cells and mirror neurons, for instance, are designed to detect subtle emotional signals others emit. They're part of what's called the limbic system. It acts as an emotional radar – constantly scanning the human terrain, picking up emotional 'blips' that help us tune in to others and get on the same wavelength. Neuroscientists call this 'limbic resonance'.

When we're empathetic, we're receptive to other people's feelings as well as to our own. The more attentive we can make ourselves in the moment, the more attuned our limbic radar becomes. Flipping the coin, emotional states like self-absorption, anger, contempt and harsh disapproval dull our radar and dissipate empathy. When we're hyper-critical or too judgemental of someone else, we close ourselves off to what they're feeling.

Empathy serves us well in several other ways. With empathy, we can say and do what's appropriate to match the feelings and moods of others around us. It enables us to handle feelings with skill, sensitivity, harmony and humour. Leaders lacking empathy (or rather, choosing not to tune in to their radar), often act in ways that antagonise, upset and grate with people. They set off negative emotional chain-reactions in others – especially powerful ones like anger, frustration or panic.

Many managers are wary of empathy. They associate it with a too softly-softly approach or being overwhelmed by someone else's strong feelings – giving in to tears, catching a disabling mood, being flooded by another's panic. We tend not to notice other critical times when we catch an emotion that inspires us, makes us feel determined, gives us a sense of hope, leads us to pull together or gets us out of the doldrums. But that's empathy at work as well!

**5 Stages of Empathy**

1. I don't care how others feel
2. I can intellectually understand
3. I read what others are feeling
4. I connect with other's feeling
5. I care and am compassionate

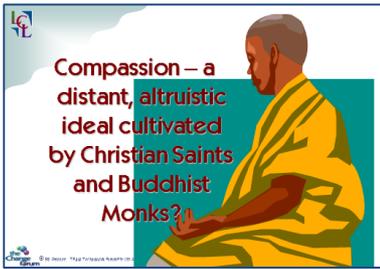
As this slide shows, we experience perhaps 5 distinct stages or levels of empathy. At the most basic level, we may pick up on something about the feelings and emotions of someone else, but you may not be very accurate, or able to respond to what you sense very well or you simply may not care and tune-out your radar. At the next level, you may intellectually understand what is going on for someone else but not connect with them emotionally. Neither of these levels are empathy since our feelings are not engaged purposely.

At level 3, I can read accurately what the feeling or emotion is for the other person, though I may still choose not to try and connect with them. Level 4 is where I do something with my radar reading – I respond to a person's unspoken concerns or feelings in a way that resonates – you're in tune with them. This is a higher level. You not only understand the issues and concerns behind another's feelings – but you can enter their world and see and feel things through their perspective.

Level 5 is the state of compassion – I care about how others feel, what they are going through and I am willing to act on that caring and compassion.

**4. Compassion:** We're going to linger on the 4<sup>th</sup> essence of connectivity for a while because connectivity is compassion in action.

#### 4. Compassion – the leadership link



'Leadership' and 'compassion' aren't words we hear linked together all that much. Although it's a quality enacted around us regularly, compassion is often seen as a somewhat distant, altruistic ideal cultivated by Christian saints and Buddhist monks – the unrealistic response of the naively sentimental, kind-hearted and soft-headed'. 'Hard-headed' (or is that 'hearted'?) managers still associate it with being 'mushy', taking a too 'softly-softly' approach, detracting from a solid outcomes focus or diluting down hard decisions when we should be business-like, stern, stoic – even ruthless.

Business cultures are most often 'busy-ness' cultures. We convince ourselves we can't make space for compassion and connection. Yet that's exactly what great leaders do make time for. They have the conviction, confidence and courage to cultivate connectivity and compassion. *"Compassion – in terms of a benevolent attitude, a predisposition to help others – lifts us out of the small-minded worries that centre on ourselves by putting a focus on others. That simple shift allows leaders a sorely needed renewal of spirit that is crucial in sustaining not only themselves but also the efficacy of their leadership."* (Dan Goleman preface to *Resonant Leadership* by Boyatzis & McKee)

Connectivity is compassion in action. It enables leaders to inspire purpose and instil hope, optimism and energy, because they resonate, empathise and connect with others around them – all of which are telling traits in building vibrant work relations, regulating and combating toxic emotions, relieving stress and restoring well-being.

Let's face it, there hasn't been a lot of room for compassionate leadership in workplaces – but this is changing. Over the past 10 years, most organisations have arrived at the recognition that leaders need high levels of Emotional Intelligence. This has opened the way forward to taking the next step: cultivating more compassionate leadership. A raft of researchers in human sciences, are starting to reveal that compassion is a potent attribute in a number of key leadership areas. For example:



- Compassion tunes-up our empathy that in turn promotes more constructive, connective relationships.
- Compassion also takes away the need to compete negatively with each other and can lead to more commitment, collective visions and collaboration.
- It counters the physiological effects of leader-stress by calming bodily reactions and acts as an insulator to combat the harmful impacts of toxic emotions on body and mind.
- It opens the gate to an array of other positive feelings like optimism and hope and is one of the keys to maintaining emotional balance and managing disruptive moods.
- It helps build up reserves of resilience – the bounce-back emotion to handle set-backs.
- It builds up well-being and has the capacity to renew or sustain the energy level of leaders. Compassion works as a renewing agent for leaders and decreases stress levels.
- Since emotions are contagious, the calmness that comes with compassion can also spread to others around you. In a real way, it helps us both get calmer and karma.

## 5. The Components of Compassion

So far, we've talked about compassion's potential benefits but what is it and what makes up compassion?



The meaning of compassion is conveyed by the original Latin root, *'compati'*, which means 'to suffer with'. Compassion is not the same as feeling sorry for others – this has more to do with sympathy. People often confuse compassion (and empathy too) with sympathy – feeling sorry for someone, with caring about someone and feeling compassionate. My definition of compassion is: *"a state of mind and heart that enables us to take the time to first understand and emotionally identify with the plight of others and then want to do something about it"*.

What makes up compassion? To answer this, we can't just rely on recent western psychology and ignore the venerably ancient Buddhist contribution, which counts compassion amongst its four main pillars.

In fact, the west has tended to focus on emotional dysfunction rather than how to cultivate positive emotions, and compassion has been the most neglected. As Lorne Ladner points out in *The Lost Art of Compassion*, we've been taught to work with damaging emotions, but western psychology has not offered "even one clear, practical, well-researched method for people to use to develop compassion" – tending instead to focus almost exclusively on what's wrong with us rather than the positive psychology of well-being. And of all the positive emotions, compassion has been most neglected... You could say that there's almost been a pathological aversion to the 'C' word.

Is there such a big gulf between east and west in our understandings of this term or is there agreement on some of its essential components? While east and west have differences in how we understand compassion, there's commonality on some of its essential components. For example:



**1. Respect and caring** is common meeting ground. Resonant Leadership authors Boyatzis and McKee claim compassion *"involves caring, curiosity, respect and real empathy"* toward others, which is echoed by The Dalai Lama, who defines it as *"a mental attitude, based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering, associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect."*

**2. Empathy's a common denominator.** In Buddhism, compassion is a deep understanding of the emotional state of another (which sounds like the western idea of empathy). It leads us to feel empathy. A slight reversal in western thought, where empathy is seen as what enables us to connect with others, which can lead us to feel compassionate.

**3. Selfless and unconditional:** both traditions see these important conditions for compassion – to put others' needs before yours and not 'favour-trade', expect something in return or give or withhold compassion depending on whether we see someone as friend or foe. As Boyatzis and McKee say: *"Compassion does not assume or expect"*. Back east, The Dalai Lama says: *"True compassion toward others does not change even if they behave negatively. (It) is based not on our own projections and expectations, but on the needs of the other, irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy."*

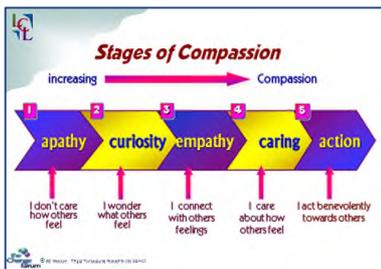
**4. Committed action:** *"Compassion is empathy and caring in action – a willingness to act on those feelings"* say Boyatzis and McKee. The Dalai Lama resonates: *"True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment characterised by action."* Loving-kindness is inspiration for such acts.

**5. Being of benefit to others** is part of both views. Compassionate acts attempt to alleviate pain and suffering of others. In Buddhism, this is the primary focus. In the west, we speak of generosity and being benevolent without any thought of gain, though we don't have such an exclusive focus on compassion as a pain-reliever. No – saying things like *"I feel your pain"* (as if!) just doesn't cut it.

Feeling genuine compassion can be difficult. It's easier when the relationship with the other person is filled with positive emotions – harder when such things are absent or even over-ridden by envy, resentment, dislike and indifference.

**6. Becoming more Compassionate**

Compassion isn't a singular thing. As this slide shows, we think there are several levels or stages. They represent some foundation steps and states for cultivating compassion. The first thing we all need to do – and this represents a first (albeit negative) stage – is overcome our apathy or indifference.



Curiosity comes next. We must be curious about what someone else is feeling and experiencing (eg *"I wonder what it feels like for them?"* or *"What must they be going through?"*). This enables us to move from apathy, indifference or self-focus to the next stage – empathy.

To be compassionate we must use empathy – we must be able to view compassionately the plight of someone else – without being overwhelmed by it – which immobilises us from taking effective helping action... The alternative is to distance ourselves from the suffering of others – which is not compassion. It's indifference, which is not the same as the Buddhist sense of detachment. Empathy enables us to connect feelings-wise and understand what another person experiences. To do this, we need to be judgement-free. Disapproval cuts across empathy. This is not yet compassion, but it's a foundation. Empathy is more than just intellectual understanding. Mentally, I can understand without my feelings engaging.

Caring is the next level. I can empathise with someone but still not care enough to act on those feelings. True compassion is heart-felt caring for the well-being of others – a state of genuine concern. Caring motivates action. But the real manifestation of compassion comes when we are willing to act. We can think and feel good deeds, but doing good deeds is what really counts. While acting compassionately is essential, there's one more thing.

Compassion's a mental state we need to find firstly inside us – our intentions for being compassionate must be clear and unselfish. We can do kind things or compassionate acts with good consequences, for example, but delving deeper, why are we doing this? Because of the need to be liked and accepted? Because we fear others will get angry or reject us if we don't? Because we feel we are paying back a previous kindness? Because we feel obligated or even because this makes us look good in the eyes of others? Because it's expected of us in our particular role or profession?

The core of compassion is heartfelt connection in situations where others are suffering and taking action when possible, to help relieve it. But being tender-hearted is not the same as being soft-headed.

There are two areas The Dalai Lama highlights about compassion, on which the West still seems vague. He cautions not to confuse genuine compassion, which is constant, with attachment, which is *"controlling"*, *"unstable"* and changeable: *"If (they) do something to make you angry, all of a sudden you find emotional attachment evaporating."*



Compassion, he confirms, is also a selfish motive (“There is also a sense of its being a state of mind that can include a wish for good things for oneself”) – that it can make us feel good and look after ourselves. Buddhists call this notion “self-cherishing” – and it takes us back to that old adage that to love someone well you need to love yourself first.

Through how they are and what they do, compassionate leaders create emotionally healthy and positively energised workplaces. They genuinely care for others’ well-being and are attentive to their needs, which they put before their own. The dilemma is that while compassionate leaders work to relieve pain, leaders also create pain as an inevitable side effect of leading, as Peter Frost points out in *Toxic Emotions at Work*. “All leaders create pain; it goes with the territory. In addition to sometimes providing inspiration and excitement, leadership is about pushing limits, setting new directions, and taking decisions that are not necessarily popular with one’s followers.... and they often feel angry, disillusioned, frustrated or afraid. Really good leaders understand these dynamics and take steps to mitigate, minimize or mop up the pain they create” (Handling the hurt: A critical skill for leaders By Peter J. Frost Reprint # 9B04TA07 IVEY MANAGEMENT SERVICES Jan/Feb 2004)

### 7. Leader-Stress and Renewal

Ever wondered why your previously inspiring, positive and supportive boss has turned sour and scratchy lately? Maybe they’re suffering from ‘leader-stress’. No – it’s not a Wagnerian opera. In *Resonant Leadership*, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, who co-authored *The New Leaders* with EI guru Daniel Goleman, start with the proposition that leadership is stressful.

As if we didn’t know that! And they have named this affliction – its “power-stress”. Exercising power puts on a lot of pressure on leaders, it seems – though the powerless people on the other end don’t get much of a look in this book. Leaders look after others but often feel cut-off and unsupported themselves. Handling those constant crises and heavy responsibilities drains us and dries up our reserves of resonance and connectivity. “Over time, we become exhausted – we burn out or burn up – so that we find ourselves trapped” in what Boyatzis and McKee call “the sacrifice syndrome”, where we constantly choose to put our job before ourselves. Once buoyant and resonant leaders slip into dissonance. “Dissonant leaders wreak havoc – they’re at the mercy of volatile emotions and reactivity – they drive people too hard and leave frustration, fear and antagonism in their wake.” And I just thought that was the way some leaders like it?

To make things worse, leaders like this are often completely unaware of the damage they do. Reserves of resonance, empathy, connectivity dry up and leaders don’t pay attention to the ‘wake-up’ calls that prefigure burn-out. Many leaders don’t look after themselves. When they don’t, once resonant and connected leaders move into dissonance.

Let’s get this right first before we talk further about the negative effects of stress. Not all stress is bad and some stress is good – even needed to perform, feel on the ball, be healthy, lively, motivated and energetic. The stress response is our natural bodily reaction to situations we find tense, threatening, fearful, uncomfortable or pressured. It helps us cope and can protect and preserve us. Short term stress is good. Measure this over minutes. A little bit keeps you younger, makes you smarter, sharper, more focused, and it makes your brain work better.

Long term stress is bad. Measure this over months. Chronic stress over prolonged periods is detrimental – it drains you of energy and liveliness and can make you feel exhausted, fatigued, distracted, forgetful, irritable and bring on feelings of hopelessness and confusion.



Stress is an emotional reaction first. When our stress levels go into the red and we get too much, chemicals that energised and made us alert, like cortisol and adrenaline, start working in reverse. They build up in our system – drain us, fatigue sets in, we can't focus, anxiety increases, we feel out of control. These feelings affect our behaviour. We start relating in scratchy ways with people. We start snapping at them as we start snapping on the inside.

We start to feel the job or people around us are demanding too much, we put more effort and time into our work convinced this is what is needed, which eats into our relax-time and physical or other pursuits that kept us balanced – and we go into meltdown. As we get busier and more stressed, we begin to feel distant and disconnected from others. We're thrown off-balance, and lose focus, energy and equilibrium. One signal is we start to get things out of proportion. Things we once handled in our stride start to trip us up. To combat our distress, we focus on working harder, schedules begin to drive us – or we withdraw into our shell and give-up. We distance ourselves from others and stop connecting with others, which is one way we derive support in stressful moments. Our sense of confidence and energy then wane and we begin to focus even more on us and how tired, behind-the-game and demanded-of we feel – and that disconnects us more.

All this is not sudden – it's insidious and slow over the long term. To make things worse, we ignore the alert signals and wake-up signals that this happening – and we do defensive routines to justify our dissonant behaviour.

Toxic emotions leave a residual in the body that affects us badly, unless we have skills to learn to let them go. They slowly penetrate our defences. Bursts of adrenaline wear down our immune system resulting in physical and mental ill-health. We feel more hopeless, helpless and hapless.

We begin to ruminate on how unfair life is, how bad our boss is, how restrictive the organisation has become and these thoughts fuel more anger, frustration, despondency and you guessed it – more stress. It's a downwards emotional spiral and our negative self-talk just spins us faster down the gurgler as a we lurch between feeling angry with and sorry for ourselves – blaming others for our troubles and afflictions.

**Pay Attention to Wake-Up Calls...**

- ❖ What are main sources of stress for you?
- ❖ Do you know your stress responses?
- ❖ What wake up calls have you had?
- ❖ What did you do about them?
- ❖ Have you changed as a result?
- ❖ Who/what do you blame for your stress?

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### 8. The cure of practising compassion

Prolonged periods of dissonance as a leader can easily spread to infect the people you lead. To counter the toxic effects of dissonance – constant crisis, unrelenting stress and pressure – leaders need to cultivate habits of mind and behaviour that can dilute or relieve them. To be resonant we must renew ourselves and that involves several key practices, which start with cultivating mindfulness, connectivity and compassion.

The notional process of renewal is relatively simple. If stress releases chemicals that are harmful and upsetting, do things that release chemical that are restorative and healing. The trick is first, facing up to the fact that this is happening to you, resolving to do something about and then finding the right set of activities that will invoke renewal.

Mindfulness, connectivity and compassion seem to be emotional states that spark or invoke these renewal chemicals – and enable us to restore ourselves and become more resilient and functional. *“Research shows that positive emotions such as compassion have a decidedly constructive effect on neurological functioning, psychological well-being, physical health and personal relationships. Consciously engaging emotions such as hope and compassion, counters the physiological and psychological harm done by stress.”* (McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston *Becoming a Resonant Leader* p. 38)

**Curing Compassion...**

“Compassion has a constructive effect on neurological functioning, psychological well-being, physical health and personal relationships. It counters the physiological and psychological harm done by stress.”

Becoming a Resonant Leader McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston p. 38



**Why Cultivate Compassion?**

- Combats stress & toxic emotions
- Releases restorative chemicals
- Generates self-calming emotions
- Insulates from contracting toxicity
- Enhances chance to self-regulate
- Builds resilience and understanding
- Increases connectivity & control

*Can you cultivate compassion?* The answer is looking like YES – and it lies in what neuro-scientists refer to as the plasticity of the brain – the ability of the brain to re-shape and re-wire itself constantly throughout our lives. Cultivating compassion and kindness through meditation affects brain regions that can make a person more empathetic to other peoples' mental states. A number of leading researchers are now studying the positive psychology of compassion.

Notable amongst these is Dr Richard Davidson, whose research suggests regular meditation 'rewires' the brain – and that having empathetic and compassionate feelings about oneself and others, 'lights up' the left prefrontal cortex – part of the brain associated with feelings of joy, happiness, enthusiasm and resilience. The right, by the way, is linked with fear, anxiety, sadness and depression. Compassion is connected to feelings of happiness, as Daniel Goleman says: *"Findings show how meditation can reshape the brain, strengthening the centres that undergird good feelings and compassion"* (foreword to *Happiness – A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* Matthieu Ricard p. xxi). Here's a few restorative practices to help you reconnect and cultivate compassion:

**Combating Stress & Toxicity...**

- Express your stress – don't vent
- Watch your wind up thoughts
- Don't mutter mad messages
- Create connective moments
- Reframe – change your story
- Do things that energise you
- Practice hope and positivity
- Forgive, accept, act with kindness
- Self-reflection & wake-up calls
- Connect - cultivate compassion

- **Become a more mindful observer of yourself.** Otherwise, you can't tell if you're going to dissonance. Do you seem more impatient, angry, frustrated, pessimistic or critical?
- **Practise empathy:** Take an extra few seconds to empathise, to acknowledge something the other person thinks or feels. Focus on how other people feel is compassion – and empathy also has a calming effect.
- **Connect:** Taking that extra few seconds to empathise, to acknowledge something the other person is thinks or feels (eg. "Seems like you feel/think that...")
- **Re-connect with people:** the last thing you feel like doing when you're stressed and the first thing you should. Creating connective moments with family, friends, colleagues has a healing, supporting, calming effect
- **Work out what really matters most:** Get back in touch with your personal vision, work out what actions you can take and do it.
- **Curiosity not Control:** being critical and judgemental does not motivate people and creates unsafe emotional climates. They adopt a stance of curiosity – wondering what's going on for others and how they can help – rather than blaming, criticising, judging or offering harsh comments. They know that coaching people towards goals is a better method than command and control and they treat each team member with respect.
- **Offer genuine forgiveness:** exercise tolerance for frailties of others. Forgive harsh words – they're hijacked by strong emotions. Ask yourself: "If I did that to someone, would I want them to understand and forgive me?"
- **Do things that energise you:** spend time on a task that energises and interests you – one you find meaningful, extending, that gives you feelings of satisfaction/completion .
- **Rediscover an old hobby, talent or past-time:** As we get busier, we let things that used to relax, energise, positively challenge us, slip. Rediscover them, or find a new interest.
- **Small acts of kindness:** Do something kind for someone every day. Appreciate, help-out, volunteer or simply take time to listen.
- **Practise contribution:** Instead of blaming, a bit of admission/humility boosts compassion – having the courage to acknowledge how you contribute shows understanding and calms.
- **Regular physical activity helps drain toxicity.** Walk. Cycle. Garden. Dance.



- ❑ **Self-reflection:** There are mental disciplines you can use to focus thoughts, control emotional reactions, and take on new patterns of being, thinking and acting that invoke compassion.

**And in Closing...**

Is there a place for a new breed of connective leader? Compassion opens a leader up to new opportunities. Unlocking your mind is comparatively easy – unblocking your heart is a lot harder. Many of us have encased ourselves in some pretty impenetrable armour....

The change towards a more compassionate style of leadership happens when we have the courage to be different – to open ourselves up to new possibilities and new ways of thinking and being – and see that we might not achieve this until we change ourselves and how we go about making space for more compassion in our leadership and our lives.

Adopting a more compassionate leadership style can strengthen relationships and create a more supportive, less stressful work climate. But it can only happen if we dare to be different – to open ourselves up to new ways of thinking and being in how we go about our leadership and our life.

While we'll no doubt never rid ourselves of the hard-hearted, bottom line exec, we may find those who exhibit the characteristics of a connective one may just fare better in handling crises, inspiring people to committed action and communicating more effectively in the more challenging economic, ecological and social climate this new millennium brings.

But there's one other overarching reason for cultivating compassion in leadership – and in life. Compassion is above all, a badge of our basic humanity. And, with Christmas coming soon, our minds naturally turn to compassion. So I'll leave you with a Christmas acronym to remind us of those things about our best selves that most matter. And if you do all this, you just may feel as if all your Christmases have come at once.

Sorry – just had to fit that in somewhere! I wish you a compassionate and happy Christmas.



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