



CENTER FOR
COMPASSIONATE
LEADERSHIP

COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP AND COVID-19 WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

The Center for Compassionate Leadership recently conducted a short survey as a global community project to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on leadership and compassion. The survey results reveal a number of valuable findings to help leaders develop their compassionate leadership skills more deeply. Below is a summary of the most compelling findings.

1. **Both a Compassion Gap and Vulnerability Gap exist between the responses and actions leaders say they're taking due to COVID-19 and the behaviors that team members say they have experienced from leadership.** Leaders are much more likely to say that they are responding to the current crisis by “Being more compassionate and concerned for individual team members” and by “Being vulnerable by sharing my feelings” than team members say they experience from their bosses.
2. **Leaders and team members have been experiencing different emotions through the COVID-19 crisis.** Leaders are much more likely to feel resilient and compassionate than their team members are, while team members are much more likely to feel a sense of powerlessness and anger.
3. **Team members want to be treated like humans.** Consistent with the quantitative survey responses, the qualitative responses show a strong desire to experience a more humane workplace. Team members report the desire to be treated with kindness, be trusted by leadership, and be managed with openness and authenticity.
4. **Self-employed and solo entrepreneurs experience many aspects of this crisis in ways similar to leaders, but they also have very different views of the crisis in a number of areas.** In the area of compassion, where there were significant divergences between leaders and team members, solopreneurs are experiencing this crisis like leaders. In other areas where all three groups were asked the same questions – emotions experienced and greatest concerns – solopreneurs showed that they are unique in their responses to this crisis. This group was the most optimistic or all responding groups, seeing the greatest potential for good outcomes to ultimately emerge from this crisis.

The Compassion and Vulnerability Gaps

Leaders are much more likely to say that they are leading with compassion and vulnerability through the current crisis than what is being felt by team members. While 67% of leaders say they are responding with more compassion, only 39% of team members say they are experiencing more compassion from their leaders. When it comes to showing vulnerability by showing feelings, 54% of leaders say they are being vulnerable, while only 28% of team members say they are observing the same thing from their leaders.

These gaps are in contrast with areas of information sharing, communicating openly and frequently, and encouraging a sense of optimism, where team members are much more likely to say that their bosses are showing those behaviors and observed those behaviors at rates much more closely aligned with the rates that the bosses say they are displaying them.

Emotional intelligence generally, and compassion and vulnerability specifically, are critical elements of compassionate leadership. These survey results show that in the midst of this crisis, leaders still have a long way to go to improve their performance along these critical dimensions.

Emotions

Survey participants were asked to choose the top three emotions from a list of 15 that they feel in the current crisis. The most common choice, by both leaders and team members, is the emotion of anxiety. 44% of leaders and 37% of team members report feeling anxious. Beyond that, the emotional experience diverges substantially.

The largest gap is around resilience, with 35% of leaders saying they feel resilient, but only 15% of team members put it among their top three choices. Resilience, the ability to adapt to and learn from adversity, is precisely the attribute organizations will want from their team members as we emerge from the current crisis. The good news is that resilience can be learned and supported in the workplace, before, during, and after adverse experiences. These results show a clear need for additional support in the area of resiliency.

Team members expressed feeling more powerless and angry than leaders. Of team members surveyed, 28% said they are feeling powerless. Among leaders, on the other hand, only 17% express feeling powerless. 20% of team members are feeling angry, as opposed to only 7% of leaders. It is critical for leaders to appreciate these strong emotions of team members in order to lead effectively now and in the future.

“Treat me like a human.”

The qualitative, open-ended portion of the survey further reinforces the qualitative findings. The most common term to appear in the open-ended responses is “be human,” and this was followed by the desire for “trust” and “openness.”

Some of the responses in team members’ own words to the question of “How would you like to be treated by those who lead you?”

“Be human. Show me you care about me and the other employees.”

“Be treated like an individual human with unique needs.”

“Care about your employees and families.”

“With humility and humanity.”

“Don’t communicate using corporate speak.”

“Express empathy, kindness, and concern for the people working in your company.”

“Appreciate your employees and teams.”

COVID-19 and Solopreneurs

A major divergence exists between leaders and team members in the area of compassion. Compassion is the most common emotion named by solopreneurs among their top three experienced emotions at 46%. This compares with 43% of leaders and 28% of team members who say that compassion is one of their top three experienced emotions. When it comes to compassionate leadership, these figures suggest that the experience of leaders is similar whether the leader is head of a large team or a team of one.

To the question asking for their single greatest concern, solopreneurs are substantially (>15%) above or below the average of responses from all respondents in six of the seven areas. Most significantly, they are least likely among the three groups to fear one of the three economic risks (weak economy, lose job, and experience deteriorating personal financial circumstances.) When asked what could come of this, they were the most optimistic, seeing greater human connectedness, an improvement in the environment, and increased compassion for all. Solopreneurs were least likely to see more job flexibility in the future.

Main Conclusions

Compassion begins with understanding the experience of another. Understanding the different tendencies of each of these groups is an important step to developing more effective methods of developing compassion in organizations.

These survey results show the areas leaders need to focus on for further development: compassionate behaviors, recognizing common humanity, being willing to be vulnerable, developing team resilience, and empowering their teams. The desire to lead using these skills is present, which is quite encouraging and implies greater ease for successful skill development.

There is no tension between compassion and leadership. In the survey, the compassionate behaviors that leaders say they are displaying are identical to evidence based best practices indicated by leadership science. Leaders know the importance of compassion and the value of displaying personal vulnerability with their team. As in so many circumstances, the gap emerges between the knowing and the doing.

The good news is that compassionate leadership skills are easily developed. Through training, attention, and practice, leaders can cultivate the compassion, vulnerability, resilience, and relational skills needed. More organizations recognize these shortcomings, and are taking proactive steps to help leaders build compassionate leadership skills and compassionate organizations.

Methodology

The *Center for Compassionate Leadership* conducted a short survey from March 27 – April 10 as a global community project to help us all appreciate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on leadership and compassion. We received over 200 responses from twenty-two countries on six continents. Nearly three-fourths of the responses came from the United States, with the United Kingdom and Canada representing another eight and six percent, respectively. We received multiple responses from Rwanda, France, Singapore, and Uganda, while the remaining fifteen countries had one response each.

Sixty-five percent of respondents identified as female, thirty-four percent as male, and one percent as non-binary. In order to best understand the role of compassion in leadership, we asked respondents to categorize themselves as a “leader, founder, or manager,” as an “employee or team member,” or as “self-employed or solo entrepreneur.” This analysis focuses on the first two groups which we refer to as “leaders,” and “team members.” We have additional analysis which includes the findings of the self-employed as well. For reference, 50% of respondents identified as leaders, 23% identified as team members, and 28% identified as self-employed.

Special thanks to our colleague Tery Spataro, market insights and research consultant at Tery Spataro Consulting for her qualitative analysis and insights.

About The Center for Compassionate Leadership

The Center for Compassionate Leadership was founded in 2019 and is a non-profit organization.

The Center’s mission is to advance compassionate methods of leadership by integrating best practices of modern leadership, evidence-based science, and contemplative wisdom. The Center accomplishes this through thought leadership, research, curriculum and training, community building, and collaboration.

The Center for Compassionate Leadership developed its organizational curriculum based on decades of business, entrepreneurial, non-profit, and contemplative experience. We train leaders how to model compassion and put it into action using evidence-based compassionate leadership tools, experiential practices, and embodiment techniques.

At the organizational level, compassionate leadership creates powerful, sustainable strategic advantage, with proven positive impact on innovation, wellbeing, financial returns, customer and employee retention, service quality, creativity, communication, and collaboration.

These chaotic times demand urgent, systemic change. We envision a more compassionate, peaceful, and equitable world, where all individuals and organizations achieve their full, innate potential for the greater good of all.

Community

Let’s connect! We’d love to hear from you and have you join the community of compassion-minded activists from around the world.



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