Compassionate Leadership

Coaching Leaders to Turn Empathy into Action

Compassionate leaders go beyond empathy. They don't just feel it, they act on it. In doing so, they increase their own wellbeing and that of the people with whom they work, creating a ripple effect that can be transformative for an entire organization. This article describes recent research on the ways that leaders convey empathy and compassion; it also discusses how to use these results to help leaders become more compassionate.

Questions addressed in this article:

- What is the difference between empathy and compassion, and why should leaders aim for higher levels of compassion?

- Which behaviors should leaders be developing to show greater empathy?

- Which behaviors should leaders be developing to show greater compassion?

- What is the role of 360 feedback in the development of compassionate leadership?

There is no question that the contemporary workplace is becoming more demanding, and that the separation between work and home life is becoming smaller. The convergence of these two trends creates ample potential for individual distress[1]. At work, employees may need to deal with change (e.g., downsizing, mergers), overwork and less than perfect relationships with coworkers. At home, employees may need to deal with financial issues, a death in the family, raising children and the like. Importantly, stressors tend to have an additive effect, where one or two are manageable but a combination of stressors thereafter can really impact one's ability to cope.

There is a lot that compassionate leaders can do to help employees and organizations manage these complexities. It is not easily achieved, but compassionate leadership can have transformative effects when implemented correctly. This article covers new research insights on how to help leaders become more compassionate. It describes the trajectory from becoming a more empathetic leader and then building on that to become a compassionate leader.

What is compassion and how does it relate to empathy?

Compassion and empathy are two separate but related concepts. Empathy is needed for compassion but it is not all that is needed. Compassion requires going a step further with empathy and actually putting it into action – doing something to reduce another's pain.

The Path to Compassion:

Noticing that someone is suffering → Feeling Empathetic Concern → Compassionate Responding

[1] Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014; Lilius, Kanov, Duttin, Worline, & Mattis, 2012

Why should leaders demonstrate compassion?

Not surprisingly, compassion has broad impact that benefits not just the receiver of the compassionate act, but the giver and the organization as a whole[2].

Benefits to individuals who RECEIVE COMPASSION:	**Benefits to individuals who ACT WITH COMPASSION:**	**Benefits to the ORGANIZATION:**
■ Physical and psychological healing ■ Reduced anxiety and stress ■ A sense of being valued ■ A tendency to view life events in a positive light ■ Reduced compassion fatigue, especially when one's role involves being compassionate too	■ Gaining a prosocial identity ■ Being seen as a strong leader ■ Creating more meaningful connections to others	■ Greater commitment to and pride in the organization ■ An increased drive to develop oneself professionally ■ A reduction in punitive actions against others ■ Greater openness to receiving help ■ Organization-wide resilience by increasing the collective capacity to heal

MRG's own research into this topic reveals that highly empathetic leaders are rated higher on people skills and cognitive skills associated with perspective-taking, indicating that there are some personal and organizational advantages to being empathetic. However, empathetic leadership alone was not associated with advantages in business or broader cognitive skills. The greatest leadership advantages emerge when empathetic leaders are also compassionate. When this happens, they outperform other empathetic leaders on almost all measures of cognitive, people, and business skills.

Given all this evidence, there is a clear business case for compassion. It is important for leaders and their coaches to truly understand compassion and its component skill, empathy.

[2] Cherkowski, 2012; Dutton et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2012

Compassion Goes Further:
How Compassion Influences Leadership Effectiveness

Leaders who are highly empathetic demonstrate a leadership advantage, scoring higher than others on 13 competencies.

Leaders who are high on compassion, however, show an even greater advantage – scoring higher on those same 13 competencies *plus an additional 12.*

Compassionate Leaders

High-compassion leaders are rated significantly higher on these 25 competencies than their less compassionate peers.

✓	Shows resilience
✓	Ability to make effective decisions
✓	Future Potential
✓	Capacity for effective thinking
✓	Delivers results
✓	Effectively leads organizational change
✓	Ability to get things done through people
✓	Demonstrates self confidence
✓	Overall effectiveness as a leader/manager
✓	Business aptitude
✓	Takes initiative
✓	Fast learner

Empathetic Leaders

High-empathy leaders are rated significantly higher on these 13 competencies than their less empathetic peers.

Empathetic		Compassionate	
Willingness to Listen	✓	✓	Willingness to Listen
Capacity to get people enthusiastic and involved	✓	✓	Capacity to get people enthusiastic and involved
Insight into People	✓	✓	Insight into People
Straightforward, open communicator	✓	✓	Straightforward, open communicator
Understanding of how to use organizational resources	✓	✓	Understanding of how to use organizational resources
Credibility with management	✓	✓	Credibility with management
Credibility with peers and direct reports	✓	✓	Credibility with peers and direct reports
Conflict management	✓	✓	Conflict management
Tolerance for ambiguity	✓	✓	Tolerance for ambiguity
Promotes and enhances employee engagement	✓	✓	Promotes and enhances employee engagement
Ability to build relationships with customers	✓	✓	Ability to build relationships with customers
Capacity to contribute to team performance	✓	✓	Capacity to contribute to team performance
Displays self awareness	✓	✓	Displays self awareness

A look behind the research

PARTICIPANTS

- A global sample of 39,431 leaders from 45+ countries

- Leadership Effectiveness Analysis (LEA) 360™ completed between 2010 and 2019

- Over 25 different industries and all management levels are represented

- 51% identified as male, 29% as female and 20% did not report their gender

THE INSTRUMENT

- LEA 360™ is a multi-rater leadership assessment

- It measures 22 leadership behaviors and 30 Competencies

- The LEA 360™ is a uniquely powerful instrument for developing a nuanced understanding of an individual's unique approach to leadership both from their own perspective and in the eyes of their colleagues

SCORING

- Each participant received a single score for each behavior and competency measured by the LEA 360™

- Scores were calculated as weighted (by rater group) means of observer ratings

Step 1: Becoming a more empathetic leader

Before a leader can work on becoming compassionate, they need to be empathetic. We first explored the behaviors emphasized by empathetic leaders to understand how leaders can develop their ability to convey empathy.

When compared to less empathetic leaders, highly empathetic leaders tend to:

Place _less_ emphasis on behaviors associated with:

- following through on projects and tasks (i.e. control, feedback),

- achieving results (i.e. management focus, dominant, production)

- making decisions independently (i.e. self)

Place _more_ emphasis on behaviors that:

- foster collaboration and welcome input from others during the decision making process (i.e. cooperation, outgoing, consensual)

These findings have developmental implications; leaders looking to increase their ability to convey empathy should consider whether their own behavior patterns align with the patterns described above, bearing in mind what realistically feels relevant in their context.
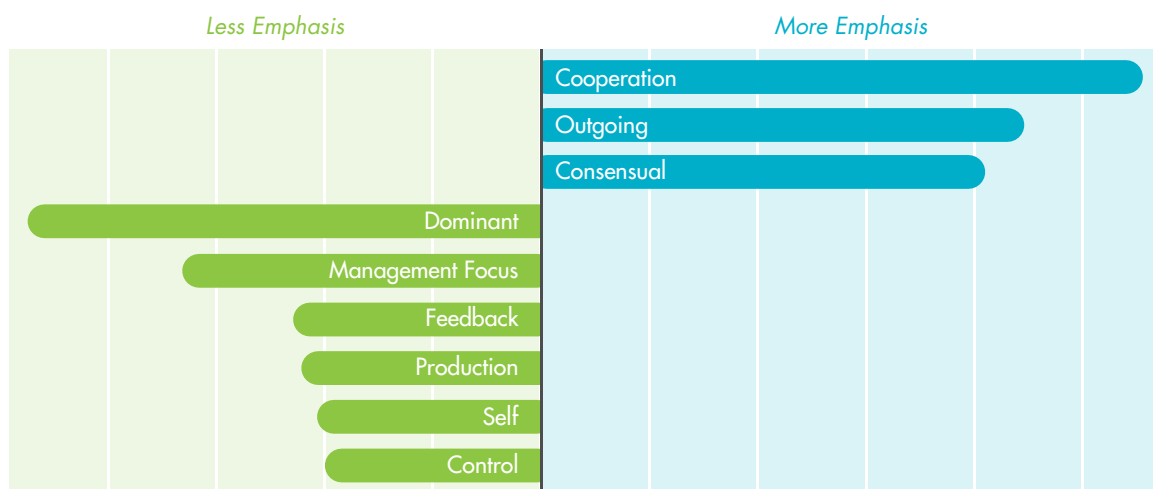
The Study

- The LEA 360™ behavioral measure of Empathy was used to categorize participants into two groups:
  - Top 35% (i.e. those scoring highest on empathy)
  - Other 65% (i.e. everyone else)
- The groups were then compared on LEA behaviors using Wilcoxon rank sum tests
- p-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons
- Common language effect sizes[3] were calculated for all comparisons and converted to odds.

[3] Ruscio, 2008

BEHAVIOR PATTERNS OF EMPATHETIC LEADERS

Less Emphasis   _More Emphasis_

Cooperation
Outgoing
Consensual
Dominant
Management Focus
Feedback
Production
Self
Control

Step 2: Becoming a more compassionate leader

The largest rewards for leaders, their teams, and their organizations are seen when empathy is turned into compassion. To coach leaders through this process we need to understand the behavior patterns that allow empathetic leaders to demonstrate compassion.

When compared with less compassionate leaders, highly compassionate leaders tend to:

Place _less_ emphasis on behaviors associated with:

- being very friendly and sociable, indicating a tendency to be more selective in when and with whom they interact in a casual manner (i.e. outgoing)

- relying on organizational norms and deferring to more senior members of the organization (i.e. authority)
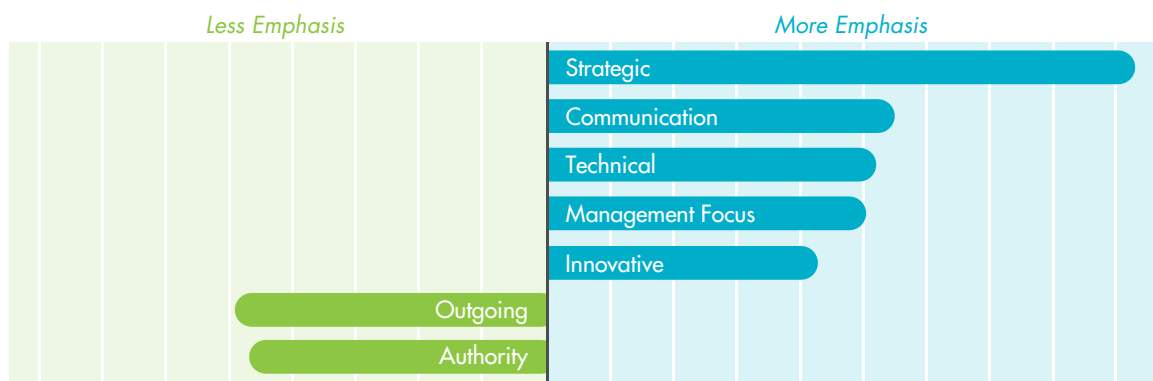
Place _more_ emphasis on behaviors associated with:

- analyzing their options and seeking to fully understand the implications of their actions (i.e. strategic)

- explaining things clearly and keeping others well informed (i.e. communication)

- maintaining specialized knowledge and demonstrating professional expertise (i.e. technical)

- willingness to take charge and be influential, but remaining somewhat selective about when to do this (i.e., management focus)

- thinking in creative ways and trying new ideas (i.e. innovative)

The Study

- Compassionate leadership was operationalized as scoring in the top 50% on all three of the following LEA 360™ leadership competencies:
  - Ability to develop people
  - Ability to work with diverse peopled
  - Demonstrates Ethical Leadership
- The top 35% most empathetic leaders from Study 1 were categorized into two groups:
  - High Compassion (i.e. leaders who scored in the top 50% on all three competencies)
  - Other (i.e. everyone else)
- To ensure that group differences were due to level of compassion, the groups were matched on level of empathy.

BEHAVIOR PATTERNS OF COMPASSIONATE LEADERS

Less Emphasis · More Emphasis

Strategic
Communication
Technical
Management Focus
Innovative
Outgoing
Authority

Applying this research: Coaching to develop compassion

When coaching leaders to show more compassion, it is important to gauge where they are in their developmental trajectory. We know that compassion starts with and builds on empathy. Therefore, step one to becoming more compassionate is ensuring that one is conveying high levels of empathy. This research found a group of behaviors that distinguish empathetic leaders from those who are less empathetic. Behaviors from this list can be used as developmental goals for leaders who need to work on showing greater empathy. It is important to recognize that leaders go into the coaching relationship with different strengths and weaknesses. Some leaders will already be emphasizing some of these behaviors at the right levels. By working with a coach, they can determine which subset of behaviors requires their developmental focus.

For leaders who were initially empathetic or have achieved a high level of empathy through coaching and development, the next step is putting that empathy into action. That is, they need to work on becoming compassionate. MRG's new research found a group of behaviors emphasized by leaders who demonstrate compassion on top of empathy. Not only do these behaviors help to identify leaders who may need coaching to demonstrate more compassion, but the behaviors can be used as developmental targets when working with this group of leaders.

> **Behaviors are ideal targets for change and development. They are observable and measurable; they are malleable and changeable with the right coaching. However, accurate self-awareness is essential for change.**

Behaviors are ideal targets for change and development. They are observable and measurable; they are malleable and changeable with the right coaching. However, accurate self-awareness is essential for change. Good 360 feedback allows a leader to experience how others perceive them. These revelations, combined with strong empirical evidence of what constitutes effectiveness in a specific area, can be strong motivators for change. However, leaders tend to have little spare time on their schedules – even the most motivated leader needs a clear path to effectiveness.

Armed with the right set of research results, coaches can help leaders find that path. MRG assessments put the leader and their coach in control. With greater self-awareness and a broad library of research to provide context and motivation for change, coaches can help leaders set the right developmental targets, quickly start working toward those goals and seeing results.

About the authors

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Maria's research explores contemporary themes in leadership, motivation and professional development. She regularly presents empirically-based insights on key topics in leadership to a variety of audiences around the world. Her research has been published in a number of scientific journals and her research on educational practices was recognized by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. She holds a Doctorate Degree in Psychology from Vanderbilt University.

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David works with clients in nearly every aspect of their work with MRG assessments including certification, solution building, consulting support and assessment application. David is very passionate about psychometric assessments, particularly in relation to areas such as selection and coaching. He works extensively with organizations around the world to help them identify critical leadership practices for personal and organizational success, and brings expertise in assessment tools and related coaching practices and methodologies.

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