

Incorporating Ethics and Compassion into Business Life: A Conversation between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Academic and Business Leaders

Remarks by Monica Worline, research fellow at University of Michigan's CompassionLab

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I would like to begin with two expressions of gratitude:

First, for the invitation to participate in this dialogue, and for all of the members of the CompassionLab who have been engaged in this research with me for almost 15 years.

And second, to His Holiness. I had the privilege to be present for a dialogue between scientists and Your Holiness at Emory University in 2007. At the end of the day, when the moderator asked His Holiness for reflections on what the scientific findings meant, he paused and looked down in silence.

Hundreds of people in the huge gymnasium hushed, and within 30 seconds a powerful feeling came over the crowd. When His Holiness spoke, he said a very simple sentence: this work matters because so many people in the world are suffering. As he said those words, my eyes flooded with tears. In the space of half a minute, we had moved from the dialogue of the mind to the truth of heart – and every person in the room was deepened. That experience fueled me to continue this research, even when the topic of compassion in business hadn't yet garnered popularity.

Research

For over a decade now, **CompassionLab's research has investigated one main question:** what are the factors, beyond the individual, that amplify compassion in an organization and what are the factors that inhibit it?

As we have investigated this question, we have made three important assumptions:

1. Organizations are filled with human pain.
2. Organizations are filled with people who are capable and good, and who generally want to respond to suffering with compassion;
3. Organizations are complex social systems that often block people's basic impulse toward compassion, make suffering invisible, or make compassionate response difficult.

Illustration

To help you understand what I mean by amplifiers and inhibitors, I want to tell you a story of one organization's response to three members who lost their belongings in a fire.

Inhibitor – Noticing

This fire broke out in the middle of a cold winter night. No one was injured, but everyone who lived in the apartment building lost all of their belongings and their homes. The organization had **no legal or formal responsibility** for the fire or for the response to these members.

- Two of the members involved in the fire were **reluctant to alert others** in the organization, because they assumed it was their individual responsibility to cope with the loss.
- This points to the **first major inhibitor** that we find time and again across organization types: it is far more difficult to discern suffering in organizations that we think it is. Concerns over professional reputation, along with emotional display rules for looking competent, often block people from sharing suffering with others.

Amplifier – The power of networks.

- The third person affected by the fire was more intent on seeking help from the organization. She arrived **physically present in the organization** in her pajamas, coat, and boots, smelling like smoke to ask for help. Her physical presence, appearance, and smell along with her request for help made her suffering real for others and activated members of the organization to put out calls for help across several networks. We have found that the more of these networks that get alerted to suffering, the more **amplified the response becomes**.
- You could think of this in today's terms as helping the call for compassion to **“go viral”** in the organization. When it went viral—as it did in this case—it unleashed an incredible array of resources, physical, financial, social, and emotional.

Inhibitor – Rigid Policies.

- Regardless of the type or size of organization, we find that managers and leaders often experience a dilemma that inhibits compassion. They are worried that expressing compassion will make them look ‘weak,’ or that by expressing compassion to one person, others will begin to take advantage of them.
- In the case of the fire, the organization had a full-service hotel used to house executive visitors. The director of this hospitality unit refused to grant housing to the members affected by the fire, because the policy of the organization stated that the housing was to be used for executives only. The leader of the unit was worried that this exception would open the door to many other requests.
- This kind of situation shows us that even an individual who feels empathy—as this unit leader did—in an organization that values compassion—as this organization did—can be blocked by organizational policies that make flexible responds to suffering difficult.

Amplifier – Leadership.

- Luckily, intervention from other leadership of the organization allowed the hospitality director to make an exception to the policy, which points to **leadership as an amplifier**.
- Leaders can amplify the expression of compassion in their organizations in 3 ways:

1. They can **introduce flexibility and remove sanctions** for customized response to suffering.
2. Leaders can **model an appropriate response** – such as when the leader in this case made a public donation to the growing fund for supporting those who had lost their homes.
3. And finally, leaders also amplify the expression of compassion when they give **explicit and consistent messages affirming the humanity of people** in an organization remind us that we are all in it together, and that it's good to take care of one another. This value matters a lot for how people make sense of what to do in the face of suffering in the organization. This value – we take care of our own, for instance, or everyone deserves our care – **amplifies the likelihood that someone in the organization who hears about suffering will feel empathy rather than indifference or even aversion** when they encounter someone who is disheveled and smells like smoke.
 - In this case, the leader interrupted a large public speech that was planned for the day of the fire to draw attention to the need, to remind the organization that it is good to take care of one another, and to encourage people to participate in the response.

Routines as Amplifiers

- **Organizational values like common humanity tend to get a lot of play** when we talk about compassion in organizations,
- **BUT, The final amplifiers I want to mention are routines.** Routines are not very glamorous – they get far less press than values, for instance. But there is a case to be made that routines are dramatically more important as **amplifiers of compassion** in organizations. Routines are what help organizations make noticing and responding to suffering easier and more reliable as part of the daily experience of work.
- In relation to the fire, the organization had strong routines for **Global Citizenship** and volunteering, so people very accustomed to cooperating to support the needs of others. **Communication** routines made it legitimate and easy to share information about the state of others via email, helping to speed up widespread coordination.
- It is hard to overstate the importance of understanding the basic routines that amplify compassion. The point here is that these routines **enable people to more easily know what to do in response to suffering, because they can do something similar to what they do everyday.** This is how organizations build compassion capability.

Effects

When we think about compassion in organizations this way, and we start to see these amplifiers and inhibitors, we find that compassion has profound effects for all of our businesses.

- Without witnessing compassion at work many employees **feel a lack of commitment to our organizations, and we lose talented people who could contribute to our success.** Others disengage—showing up physically, but not full present with their hearts and minds ready to contribute.
- Without compassion for changing circumstances and an ability to touch into the experiences of others who are in pain, we **cannot deliver high-quality service** to our customers or partners.
- Without **compassion for the difficulty of working together** we cannot perform the highly complex collaborative and interdependent work demanded by today's global organizations.
- And finally—crucial for today's audience—Without **empathy for our customers, without compassion for errors that arise, and without sensitivity for the difficulty of navigating change,** we cannot create and lead truly innovative organizations.