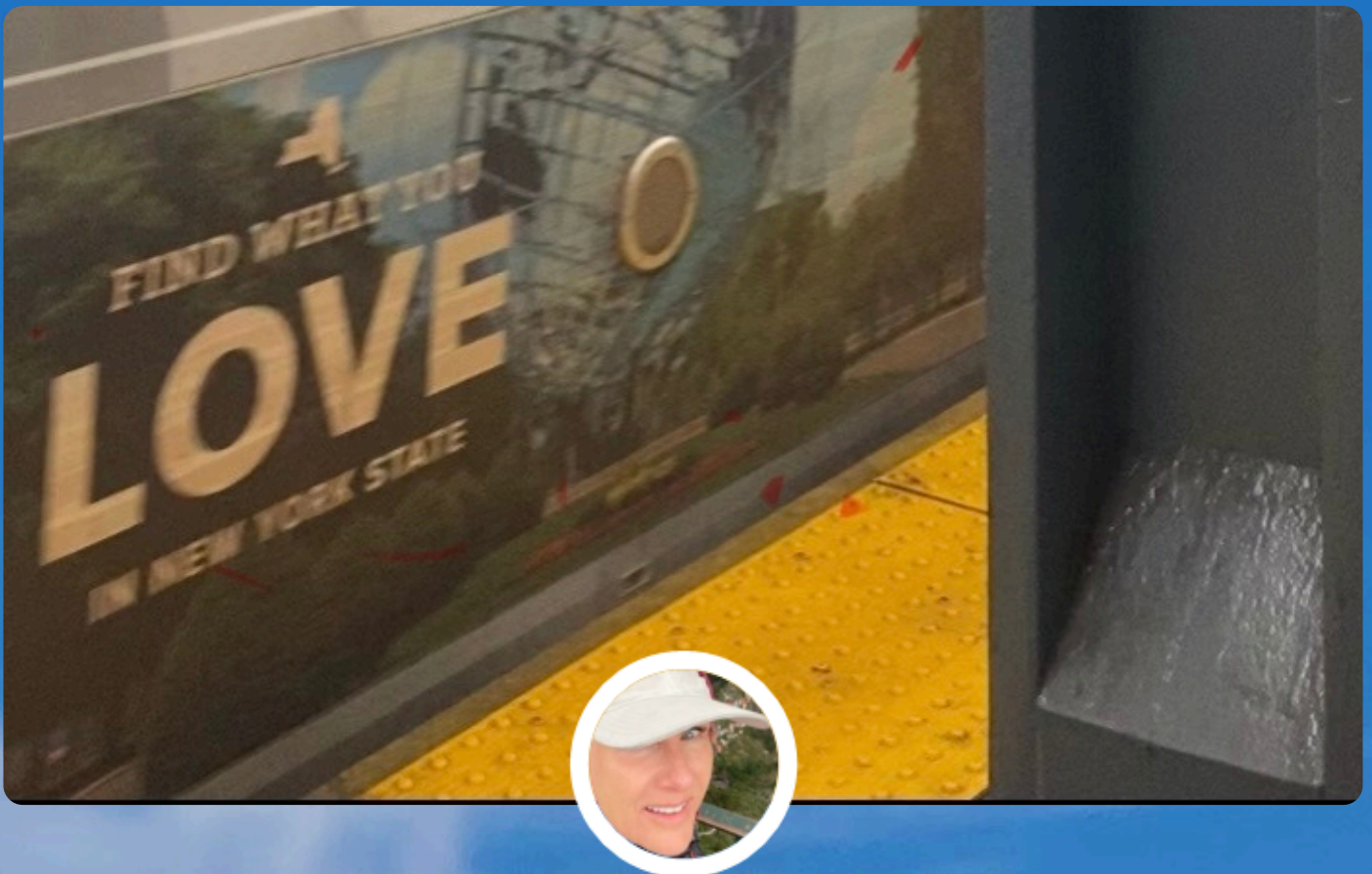


Empathy or Compassion in the workplace?

Written by [Caroline Holmyard](#)



These are two terms that are now common usage in the workplace. They are also misused in the workplace as the words have different meanings, different roots and different implications for people designing policies that include both as elements in the appropriate measure.

Semantics are tough here. As with everything, the devil is in the detail.

Workplace leaders that do not try to understand the difference do so at their peril.

Might help to start with definitions.

"Compassion", identified as a term as early as the year 1340, has two main entries in the OED (II Edn); the first being "Suffering together with another, participating in suffering: fellow-feeling, sympathy"



And the second "The feeling of emotion when a person is moved by the suffering and distress of another, and the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines to one to spare or to succour"



In the workplace we do not really want to suffer together (*What's the point of that?*) but we do want, where possible, to offer relief and give succour but definitely not pity. People under workplace stress, whatever the cause, do not want to be pitied – they need to be supported and shown reasonable compassion. So, **being compassionate does not mean that you want to join the situation of a person that should be shown compassion but you understand it**, but don't feel good about it.

Is that different from Empathy?

Well, yes, it really is. We'll see now that **Empathy drives an involvement** whereas Compassion might not.



Empathy first really surfaced as a term as late as 1903 in a German psychology journal. It's defined as "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object [person] of contemplation."

This is helpful. Compassion is how we might want to think in the workplace. Empathetically is how we might want to intervene or act.

This is being emphasised in a current, and sobering, Wellbeing related radio advertising campaign featuring a woman returning to work after a mastectomy (Global Radio – Smooth Sound – May 2025). Everyone at the woman's place of work being very kind and welcoming but they do not understand her condition and what help she needs. So, compassion vs. empathy.

We'd all like to work in an environment that clearly exhibits both. One would think that productivity would be good, colleague relations would be strong with ties both inside and outside work. With the right measures, and supported by considered policy and process, the outcome should be a good one.

Importantly, the senior leadership team, in particular, but also line managers too, need to practice both compassion and empathy. Further, whatever processes and policies are in place need to be sustainable and, above all, measured. Lots of CEOs do not warmly embrace the concept of being empathetic; seeing is as not an activity that is suitable for them to be seen doing day to day.

The evidence seems to support this. Dr Palena Neale, a Paris based consultant specialising in Women's leadership practices, writing in the Harvard Business Review, quotes the 2024 State of Workplace Empathy Review as saying that just 55% of CEOs see themselves as being leaders with an empathetic stance. But only 28% of employees see their leaders as empathetic and that falls to 22% with HR practitioners.



In a nutshell, it seems that an appropriate level of sustainable empathy & compassion does not widely exist across workplaces.

Here's why it needs to.

Leaders need to do just that, lead. They achieve multiple business objectives (profit, revenue growth, geographic expansion, a growing market share, new market penetration and more) through teams of people.

Those teams need to understand and believe that they are cared for and cared about. This all falls under the umbrella term "*Engagement*".

The benefits of an engaged environment are many and various. The business benefits are tangible and are reflected not just in productivity but in lower levels of absenteeism, reduced staff turnover, diminished recruitment and training costs.

So far so good. Hmmm. *Or is it?*

Does all of this just get to the point where it is too much? Over sensitivity to others, and one's own condition, and caring too much about things that we probably could manage a bit better. It's a possibly controversial view, but a widespread level of over sensitivity and having to be endlessly compassionate and empathetic, and being seen to be both, towards other people can induce a fatiguing mindset that is not that helpful.

Balance is the issue here. The issue.

We can develop a spiral of thinking that is going the wrong way. Downwards. Viewed from a group or community perspective this could even lead to learned helplessness; a state where people become individually and collectively fragile. Less robust and less self-reliant. Worryingly, there is mounting evidence that this is real and happening.

Consider the news stories where people have taken offence or are angry because their feelings have, according to them, been unfairly ill considered, hurt or ridden over. The issue is the interpretation of a vibe rather than a reaction to a specific decision or ruling or action.

In many instances, there is without a doubt, a raft of cases where sexism, misogyny, harassment, unreasonable work demands, bullying and discriminatory behaviours prevail in the workplace.

Wow! This is gloomy. Tough, difficult, demotivating, boring, negative and counterproductive? Yep, all that, for sure.

But there is always light at the end of that tunnel. And that light burns bright. Let's have a look at that light. Strap in and focus!

We talked about balance earlier. That is the location of the solution.



You should expect empathy and compassion from your leaders, individually and collectively, and that should reflect in policy. And if you are the HR lead, you should have thought very hard about all this in a holistic way. So, if you are one, *how good are your ideas and policies?*

And then there is the individual level. What are you doing to help yourself? Ouch, tough question!

With all of this going on around us, to whatever extent, we have to look to ourselves to become stronger, become more

self-reliant and develop greater resilience. We need to build a new level of self-reliance and not just for ourselves but, if we can, for people around us.

Ever thought of creating an entirely new and different relationship? One that will guarantee confidentiality, reliability, a relationship where you remain in control the whole time. A situation that will never question or criticise you. A relationship that will encourage you to share your thoughts but never reveal them to anyone else, ever? Totally private and individual to you.



The outcome of such a relationship should be heightened self-reliance, greater self-confidence, increased ability to solve-and-overcome-your- own-challenges, built up resilience and more.

Face workplace challenge & worry with confidence. Be your own best.

We, actually, have very little to fear. Sometimes we just need a bit if a nudge to realise that.

That's for an individual. *How about if you were an HR Director enabled to read the collected anonymous collected thoughts of your employees?* You'd see, in Quantitative Data, the exact collective sentiment of your workforce – wow!



Invitation

HR Directors If you're curious to explore this further reach out to us
at contact@noworriesapp.com

What an opportunity to develop intelligent workforce and
workplace focused Empathetic and Compassionate policy.

Interesting idea?

Yes, then do it. Do it now!

Article published on the Health&Wellbeing Magazine May 2025

<https://mag.foyht.org/>

NoWorriesApp.com

