

# How To Be a Compassionate Leader

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Leaders in both Public and Private Sector organisations need to consider with great care how they wish to curate their outward looking persona. Being aligned with the prevailing mood and sentiment of an organisation's wider stakeholders is critically important.

The age of the tough, no nonsense, no compromise, relentlessly competitive, hard bargaining executive leader is largely over and has been for some time. That said, there are still many organisations operating in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century leadership ethos but they are very much in a shrinking minority.

The prevailing vibe is that there is more to life than work and climbing the greasy pole. Attitudes and life orientations have moved decisively in the direction of work life balance. The 1980's Darwinian phrases that went along the lines of "eat lunch or be lunch" just don't really hold any more with the exception of one or two high profile business Sectors. They persist with the view that long hours and iron will are the two keys to future success. We'll return to them in a bit. But first, this.



So why did the pendulum swing away from the leadership behaviours that hallmarked the 1980s and continued into the early 2000s?

Put simply, the ethos was not sustainable in the face of the societal changes that saw people seeking experiences over materialism and leisure time instead of overtime. But this wasn't the full extent of the reasons for the swing of our emerging work philosophy pendulum. Distortions in the housing market meant that people could not afford to buy the property to which they aspired and for which they had slavishly striven. Driving a swanky car seemed to lose its appeal as the environment lobby got to work but leisure travel was persistently and relatively inexpensive. So, people went for that. There was an explosion in mid-market weekend breaks.

This is all very well but what has this got to do with leadership and compassion?

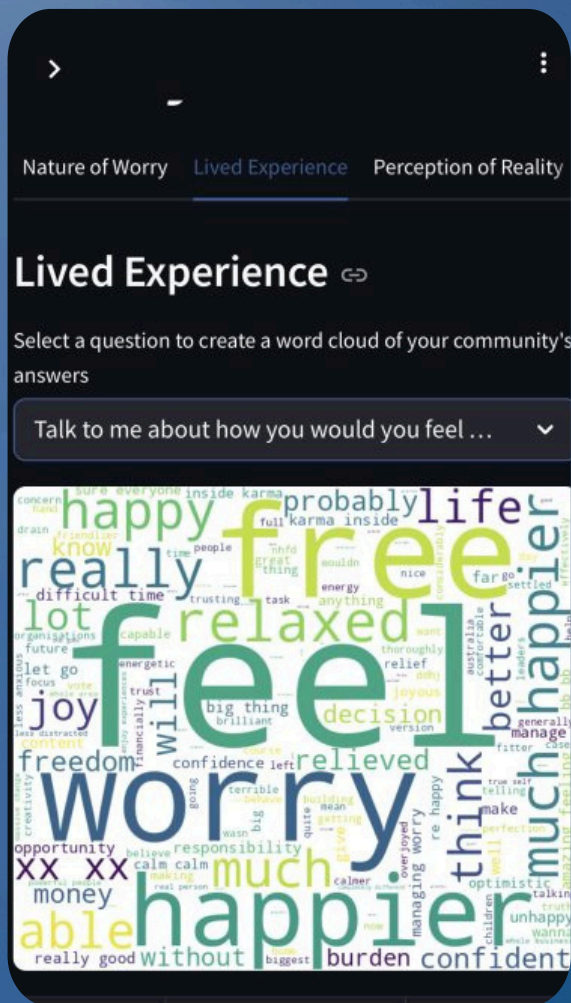
Well, quite a lot. The new and emerging reality was, and continues to be, that the very nature of the worker, and consequently work, is changing. Out with an acceptance of long hours, lunch at your desk and late arrival at, or even missed, dinner parties on a Friday evening. The process required, demanded, facilitation. In came dress down Friday, shorter working weeks, longer holidays, gym memberships and working from home crept into the working week too. Leaders had to recognise and accept this shift and then fully embrace it. Suits and ties swapped places with chinos and polo shirts and childcare became integrated into work routines, fitting in with a flexible hours shaped working week.



Leadership behaviours therefore had to change. Recruitment, training and retention had to change. No choice. Change the leadership style and approach or the staff will walk and not return as they can get what they want elsewhere. We're back at empathising with the prevailing sentiment and the alignment mentioned in the introduction.

Interestingly, so far it seems that the changing workplace only offered benefits to the workers.

You'd think so wouldn't you? But before you adopt that view consider the slowdown in wage inflation in the period. And, more importantly, the uplift in productivity. This is critically important in the UK, in particular, because the UK has a significantly lower productivity level among developed economies and yet the British worker seems to put in more hours.



The really interesting stuff about a compassionate leadership approach is that the intangibles derived have huge benefits. These are less easy to measure but have a massive impact on culture, profit, costs, innovation, training, recruitment and retention.

We talked about alignment earlier. Alignment and the wider buy-in to a strategy are fundamental. If a company or community are all on the same page, the daily operation of business is easier – it's smoother, fewer questions, less distraction and less dissent. More of a focus on delivery. More what and when rather than why and how.

A key benefit for the compassionate leader is the reward embedded in the organisation's culture shift.

Let's put a bit of a magnifying glass to this.

Compassionate leaders are more likely to build trust and rapport with their team members. This leads to better communication, collaboration, and a more cohesive team. The Harvard Business Review has been researching, commenting, and reporting on this for some time. The research findings consistently showing that compassion and trust go hand in hand. Trust walks comfortably with confidence which sprints alongside the delivery of objectives. It's quite an easy chain to follow and sentiment flows through this from the starting point that is compassion.

Being compassionate is one thing and demonstrating compassion is quite another. Sentiment is a fast-moving train. You need to be both on board and closely aligned with the passengers. To extend the analogy, consider the immediate impact on the sentiment, and faces, of passengers when told there will be a 60-minute delay. Within seconds the passengers are already groaning and mentally gaming the consequences of the holdup in progress. When the train moves again there are sighs of relief and anger subsides and the sentiment needle moves.

Back to our magnifying glass and a glance at the wider work environment.

When employees feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and productive. Engagement and motivation are so important. In a competitive marketplace, having a strongly motivated team informs on sustainable competitive advantage. Talent is great but talent minus motivation is talent wasted, and opportunities lost. Motivation and intra team trust are key enabling characteristics for cooperation and collaboration. Ideas, enhancement, advancements, and improvements are shared willingly in a culture where compassion is at the forefront of the organisational ethos.

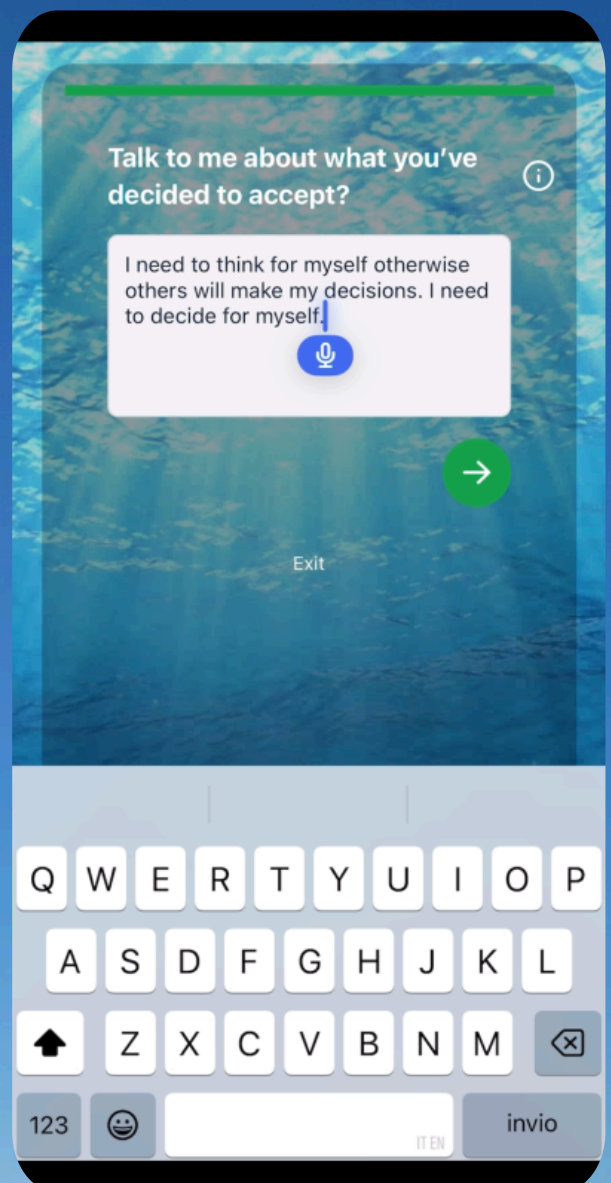
We're talking here about fire, energy, drive and enthusiasm. What a potent combination. Exciting stuff.

## But not everyone is doing it.

It's crystal clear that compassion has a transformational impact on culture, productivity, motivation, happiness and more. So why would you not do it?

The standout business Sector where compassion has, to put it kindly, a lower profile is Law. As an industry it is highly competitive and adversarial, and you make much of your money through disputes and points of difference rather than common ground. So, the culture of a law firm seems to have to reflect this. And plenty of research suggests this is very much the case regardless of what law firms choose to put on their websites.

The casualties of this lack of compassion in law firms, and indeed the wider professional services domain, are employees who are stressed to the point of burnout. There is a notable lack of openness regarding mental health and a lack of employee support frameworks such as mentoring. Those uncomfortable with the ethos and ethics of the Victorian workhouse are often perceived as weak.



With such a focus on individual success and the “billable hours” culture (law firms commonly bill in units of just 6 minutes) those that display compassion or empathy for colleagues are themselves isolated and frequently viewed as weak. The levels of intra firm trust and co-reliance are therefore low.

The casualty list does not stop at the front door. Kudos in law firms is afforded to those who bring new clients on board. This is at the expense of good quality client care for existing clients, so they suffer too. Some law firms are learning the compassion related lessons and acting accordingly but the rate of change is slow. Very slow.

A picture is emerging that a more positively charged work environment can and does deliver where compassion is adopted and embraced to the point where the whole organisation lives out the compassion agenda.

When employees feel connected to their workplace and their leaders, they are more likely to stay with the company, reducing turnover costs. Great enterprise wide sentiment nurtures better quality sustained business outcomes. Further, happier, and more engaged employees want to give more and perform better. They will stay with the employer longer – reducing hiring and training costs – and will want to have not just a paid job but an enriching career and a happy future.

We can see that through some of the issues raised above, and the contrasts being made, through deploying compassionate based leadership and lifting sentiment across an organisation, that an organisation will future proof itself and remain sustainably competitive.



If you would like to better understand exactly how compassion and sentiment are operating and could operate, in your organisation, [click here](#).

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