

Leading in Times of Trauma

ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, tragic circumstances present us with a challenge for which we simply cannot prepare. The terrorist attacks of last September immediately come to mind, but managers and their employees face crises at other times, too. Tragedies can occur at an individual level – an employee is diagnosed with cancer, for example, or loses a family member to an unexpected illness – or on a larger scale – a natural disaster destroys an entire section of a city, leaving hundreds of people dead, injured, or homeless. Such events can cause unspeakable pain not only for the people directly involved but also for those who see misfortune befall colleagues, friends, or even total strangers. That pain spills into the workplace.

The managerial rule books fail us at times like these, when people are searching for meaning and a reason to hope for the future. There is, however, something leaders can do in times of collective pain and confusion. By the very nature of your position, you can help individuals and companies begin to heal by taking actions that

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demonstrate your own compassion, thereby unleashing a compassionate response throughout the whole organization. Our research at the University of Michigan and the University of British Columbia's CompassionLab has demonstrated that although the human capacity to show compassion is universal, some organizations suppress it while others create an environment in which compassion is not only expressed but spreads. (For more on our research, see the sidebar "A Brief History of the CompassionLab.")

Why is organizational compassion important, beyond the obvious and compelling reasons of humanity? Unleashing compassion in the workplace not only lessens the immediate suffering of those directly affected by trauma, it enables them to recover from future setbacks more quickly and effectively, and it increases their attachment to their colleagues and hence to the company itself. For those who witness or participate in acts of compassion, the effect is just as great; people's caring gestures contribute to their own resilience and attachment to the organization. Indeed, we've found that a leader's ability to enable a compassionate response throughout a company directly affects the organization's ability to maintain high performance in difficult times. It fosters a company's capacity to heal, to learn, to adapt, and to excel.

In the following pages, we will describe the actions leaders can take to enable organizational compassion in times of trauma. Before we begin, it's worth noting that some of our examples draw from the events of September 11, 2001, because the magnitude of pain surrounding those events was unprecedented in business history and because the public nature of those events makes the stories relevant to a broad audience. However, pain occurred in the workplace long before last September, and individual and group traumas will continue to disrupt people's daily routines—at times, shattering their lives—as long as humans continue to conduct business.

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Beyond Empathy

When people think of compassion, the first thing that comes to mind for many is empathy. But while empathy can be comforting, it does not engender a broader response and therefore has limited capacity for organizational healing. Instead, our research shows that compassionate leadership involves taking some form of public action, however small, that is intended to ease people's pain—and that inspires others to act as well.

TJX president and CEO Edmond English, who lost seven employees aboard one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center, gathered his staff together shortly after the attacks to confirm the names of the victims. He called in grief counselors the very same day and chartered a plane

to bring the victims' relatives from Canada and Europe to the company's headquarters in Framingham, Massachusetts. He personally greeted the families when they arrived in the parking lot at midnight on September 15. Although told by English that they could take some time off after the attacks, most employees opted to come in to work, as English himself had done, and support one another in the early days following the tragedy.

For a historical perspective on the same kind of compassionate leadership, we can look to Britain's Queen Mother, who demonstrated

great courage by refusing to leave London as bombs ravaged the city around her during World War II. She and King George visited sites that had been destroyed during the Blitz of 1940, showing her dedication, concern, and commitment to the Allied cause, and inspiring lifelong admiration and loyalty for her constant presence.

In vivid contrast, immediately following the terrorist attacks in New York City, leaders at a publishing company close to ground zero refused to disrupt business as usual. The company held regularly scheduled meetings the day after the attacks and provided little or no support for people to share and express their pain. One editor told us she'd gotten a call at home early on the morning of September 12, just as she was trying to help her eight-year-old daughter make sense of what had happened the day before, demanding to know why she was late for a meeting. She went to work and sat through a four-hour conference call but was present in body only. Because she was given no opportunity to connect with her family, friends, and colleagues and was offered little organizational comfort in the face of a terrifying and confusing sequence of events, she felt her loyalty to the company eroding with every passing minute.



When people know they can bring their pain to the office, they no longer have to expend energy trying to ignore or suppress it, and they can more easily and effectively get back to work.

What English and other leaders have done – and what the leaders of the publishing company failed to do – is facilitate a compassionate institutional response on two levels. The first level is what we call a *context for meaning* – the leader creates an environment in which people can freely express and discuss the way they feel, which in turn helps them to make sense of their pain, seek or provide comfort, and imagine a more hopeful future. The second level is a *context for action* – the leader creates an environment in which those who experience or witness pain can find ways to alleviate their own and others' suffering. We have undertaken in-depth studies of leaders at organizations facing all manner of crises, and we have found that those who excel at leading compassionately and effectively in times of crisis adhere to a set of shared practices that help people make sense of terrible events and allow employees to move on.

Meaning amid Chaos

Acute trauma, tragedy, or distress can cause people to engage in intense soul-searching. We aren't referring to the restlessness and stock-taking that are a natural and ongoing process as people mature and grow in their careers; we're talking about the persistent and vexing questions that affect how people live their lives: Why did this happen? Could I have prevented it? How will we cope? Why me? And even, for employees who witness a tragic event but are not directly affected, why *not* me?

It isn't your job as a leader to answer these questions. But at the same time, it's not realistic or reasonable to ask people to ponder these questions only on their own time, outside the office. Instead, you can cultivate an environment that allows people to work through these questions in their own way so they can eventually start assigning meaning to events and begin healing.

You can start by setting an example for others by openly revealing your own humanity. You may well experience the same emotions affecting your employees – from deep sorrow to anxiousness to uncertainty to anger to steely resolve. Openly expressing these feelings can be very powerful for those who witness it, especially during times of extreme pain. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's public display of grief in the wake of the New York terrorist attacks set the stage for an honest expression of anguish throughout the city and, at the same time, strengthened people's resolve to rebuild and restore confidence in the city. When people know they can bring their pain to the office, they no longer have to expend energy trying to ignore

A Brief History of the CompassionLab

THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON THREE YEARS OF RESEARCH conducted at the CompassionLab, a joint project of the University of Michigan Business School and the University of British Columbia. We began our work in 1998, based on a common interest in the way that stories of compassionate acts could inspire further acts of compassion. Over the next couple of years, we began to explore how different organizations deal with pain and compassion, and we found stunning differences in their capacity for compassion. This capacity turned out to have a direct impact on how quickly and effectively people in those organizations were able to recover from tragic events.

To learn more, we conducted extended studies on the life spans of painful events – for instance, serious illness, death, and violent acts – tracing the organizational response from the onset of the events. We interviewed the people directly affected, as well as those who witnessed others' suffering, to learn how organizations can encourage or suppress the healing process. Recently, we've been looking at how the degree of organizational compassion in a company affects employee retention. We're also conducting in-depth studies in which we observe everyday acts of compassion in an effort to understand which actions enable and which hinder healing.

Our research took on added urgency after September 11, 2001. As the effects of this trauma and pain continue to unfold, we wanted to share our findings to date.

or suppress it, and they can more easily and effectively get back to work. This may be a mutually reinforcing cycle, since getting back to a routine can be healing in itself.

Conversely, when you expect people to stifle their emotions, they don't know how and where to direct their energies, and it's very difficult for them to figure out how to focus at work. It can also test their loyalty to the organization. We interviewed employees at an architectural firm where a visitor died suddenly in the firm's hallways despite employees' heroic efforts to revive him. Company leaders did not acknowledge the trauma publicly, leaving people shocked and demoralized – and uncertain about how to respond should such an event occur again. Some employees were wracked with guilt over not being able to save the man's life. Others felt weak and helpless because

they had no opportunity to grieve in the presence of their colleagues. They had shared a significant experience and could not console one another – or even recognize people's extraordinary efforts to revive the victim. This one event damaged not just the employees who were directly involved but also the social fabric of the whole company. By acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, the company's leaders left people feeling as if the organization didn't recognize them as human beings, which created a rift between employees and management that has never been repaired.

A seemingly simple but important aspect of demonstrating your humanity is just being present, physically and emotionally. It shows employees that the organization cares about what happens to them and will do whatever it can to help them in a time of need. At one leading market-research firm, a senior executive died suddenly of a heart attack. The grief-stricken CEO personally visited each member of his 20-person management team to deliver the news, going house to house to share in each person's sorrow. His presence couldn't undo their colleague's death, nor could it stop their pain. But there is tremendous power in just sitting with people as they process terrible events. Bear in mind, too, that being there

doesn't mean you have to visit people at home. Sitting with someone who's going through a crisis in his or her office can be just as powerful.

It isn't necessarily words that matter at times like these. Indeed, the dean of a divinity school told us that when a close relative died unexpectedly, he had been most comforted by one couple who arrived at his house and simply wept with him. To this day he remembers their very presence as a powerful moment of healing. Unfortunately, however, the simple act of being there doesn't come easily or naturally to most people. It can be much easier to avoid those who are in pain. One CEO in our research told us that his natural tendency had been to shrink from addressing people's personal problems – until the sudden death of his own son revealed for him the power of other people's presence.

Leaders can also help people in times of trauma by taking care of their basic needs, which gives people room to make meaning of events for themselves and allows them to focus on coping with the crisis. This is one reason people bring food to friends who have suffered a death in the family, but it can apply to organizations as well. At one consulting firm we studied, an employee's daughter suffered an horrific car accident far from home. To make

Measuring Organizational Compassion

FOR A QUICK, HIGH-LEVEL CHECK on your organization's capacity for compassion, consider how it performs on the following four dimensions. Each indicator is a measure of the organization's compassion competence, which helps people to heal and continue on with their work when times are bad:

The **scope** of compassionate response refers to the breadth of resources provided to people in need, such as money, work flexibility, physical aid, and other people's time and attention. If an employee falls ill, is time off the only support, or does the system supply a wide range of healing resources such as variable work hours, gestures of comfort (like food, flowers, and cards), financial support, and assistance with child care?

The **scale** of compassionate response gauges the volume of resources, time, and attention that people who are suffering receive. Companies that are most effective at unleashing organizational compassion

match the scale to the need. When a block of apartments was destroyed in a fire, the people who lived in the apartments, who worked for different companies, found a wide variation in how their companies responded. Some received a routine distribution of insurance coverage. Others were astonished at the outpouring of help from both corporate channels and individual colleagues – money, housewares, furniture, and offers of places to stay. In the latter case, the compassion competence of the system is more likely to help employees heal faster even as it strengthens their loyalty to the company – among those who experienced the tragedy directly and among those who witnessed and participated in the response.

Speed of response can vary widely as well. Companies with a competence for compassion extract and direct resources quickly, with little hesitation. Responding compassionately is a hardwired capability. Even in highly regimented bureaucracies, compassion can

it easier for the employee and her husband, the company's leaders rented an apartment for them near the hospital. Knowing that they had a safe and close place to stay removed one aspect of the family's stress and allowed them to focus on their daughter's health.

In another example, the wife of a terminally ill employee at Cisco Systems was so taxed with caring for her husband that she couldn't find the time to make him a pot roast, his favorite dinner, on his birthday. Barbara Beck, a senior vice president at the company, decided she would cook a pot roast and deliver it to the family herself. The gesture lent a semblance of normalcy to the occasion and gave the employee's wife the space she needed to cope with her husband's illness and to process its effects on her life. In yet another case, the branch manager at a bank, whose close friend and second-in-command died of a heart attack, took on numerous extra duties and clients so his employees would have additional time to mourn—even as he himself was suffering tremendous grief.

This meaning-making process can also be supported by communicating and reinforcing organizational values—reminding people about the larger purpose of their work even as they struggle to make sense of major life issues. When *Newsweek* employees were coping with the

unexpected illness and death of editor Maynard Parker, the magazine's editor-in-chief, Richard Smith, at once emphasized the company's commitment to community and its commitment to remaining a world-class news-magazine. He created an environment in which people could do their best work and at the same time share their sorrow over Parker's losing battle with leukemia. Smith gave daily updates on Parker's condition and stressed that the company was actively involved in getting him top medical care. Knowing that they had ample opportunities to talk about their feelings, and that Parker was getting the best care possible, the *Newsweek* staff could then concentrate on honoring the publication's commitment to remaining a leading newsmagazine—which was particularly meaningful because Parker had so enthusiastically pursued this goal himself. The year's most significant news event was breaking just as Parker fell ill, and *Newsweek* emerged as a leader in the coverage in part because employees wanted to honor Parker in the way he would have valued most—by showing tremendous loyalty in an industry marked by high turnover.

Mark Whitaker, who was then managing editor and succeeded Parker as editor, has reflected on how Smith and others at the top of the organization provided meaning for people that could sustain them through the crisis and beyond. "I think it made people realize, 'Well, if I ever have a situation like that myself, God forbid, this is a company that will be there for me.' That is an intangible thing, but I think it's very powerful," Whitaker recalls. "The way that you deal with tragedy and illness and misfortune in the lives not only of your top people but of all your people really defines your values as an organization."

The Benjamin Group, a Silicon Valley-based public relations firm, demonstrates its values by taking a stand on how employees are treated not only by their colleagues and managers but also by their customers, suppliers, and other business partners. CEO Sheri Benjamin has established a code of principles that includes the statement "We're all in this together," and one implication is that if a client is consistently abusive to firm members, the firm will resign the account. A few years ago, the company dropped a million-dollar account—at that time, worth fully 20% of its annual business. Employees were startled that the firm would go so far, but they were energized, too: Inspired by the knowledge that the PR firm cared about their well-being, they worked extra hard to bring in new clients.

A final note on meaning-making: Symbolic gestures can be very powerful. Two days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, England's Queen Elizabeth II asked her troops to play *The Star-Spangled Banner* during the changing of the guard services outside Buckingham Palace. This extraordinary break from a time-honored tradition, dating back to 1660, gave

kick in quickly. In one manufacturing organization, a manager suffered a severe head injury that required almost three months of recovery. This was just after he had been appointed to lead an important experimental project that removed him from the regular compensation scheme and placed him on an incentive pay and benefits system. His previous job had been filled, and he was effectively stuck in no-man's land. A senior operations manager swiftly reinstated the man's previous compensation, obtaining the necessary sign-off without delay, an act that allayed the family's anxiety over its financial circumstances.

Specialization measures the degree to which the system customizes resources to the particular needs of an individual or a group in pain. If, for example, several employees' children are injured in a bus accident, some families will need close communication and hands-on comforting. Others will need to grieve privately and get back to work quickly.

thousands of Americans far from home, as well as supporters from other countries, a way to pay their respects and to mourn.

Actions amid Agony

A context for meaning is the all-important backdrop for creating a compassionate organization, but it is in creating a context for action that leaders can truly unleash an organization's power to heal. As a leader you can set the right example to awaken the potential for compassion, and you can prompt the organizational infrastructure to reinforce and institutionalize compassionate acts.

Perhaps the most important step you can take is to model the behaviors you would like to see others demonstrate. Frequently, people aren't sure if it's appropriate to bring personal matters into the workplace, or they may simply not know how. You can show them, using your status and visibility as a leader.

When a fire destroyed some student living quarters at the University of Michigan Business School, former dean B. Joseph White interrupted his annual "state of the school" speech—typically heavily scripted and highly formal—with some strikingly personal remarks. He assured displaced students that the school would house them and wrote a personal check on the spot to pledge his support. Word of White's actions spread fast, catalyzing a campus-wide effort to tap alumni, faculty, and staff networks to find housing, financial support, and other resources for the students affected by the fire.

Leaders can also use their influence to reallocate resources to support people in need. We spoke with the manager of a billing department at one hospital who makes it a point to know the workloads and the personal circumstances of each member of her unit; that way, she can cut people slack when they need extra support. For example, when one employee's husband suffered kidney failure and was awaiting a transplant, the billing manager gave the woman a pager and organized a team of people who could step in and pick up the woman's work on a moment's notice. That way, the employee would be able to take her husband to the hospital without delay if a kidney became available.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the MWW Group, a public relations firm based in East Rutherford, New Jersey, juggled its resources so that people could take time off to volunteer at relief organizations. We've also seen leaders redirect funds intended for other purposes to pay for grief counselors in times of collective trauma.

When tragedy strikes, a company's existing infrastructure (its formal and informal networks and routines) can be helpful in locating useful resources, generating ideas, coordinating groups that are not typically connected, and communicating to people what is happening and how the company is responding. For example, after two Macy's

stores were badly damaged in the 1994 Northridge, California, earthquake and could not immediately reopen, a store manager used the payroll system to quickly deliver cash to employees whose homes were destroyed. Macy's issued emergency advances of up to \$1,000 at a time so that people could secure food, water, and shelter for their families. Following the immediate relief effort, the human resources team used its standard placement routines to search among Macy's stores in Southern California for opportunities to put displaced workers back on the job right away. HR workers quickly determined where help was most needed and then used their networks of employees to establish car pools for people. Within a short time, all employees and undamaged stores were up and running again. People often think of routines as unwieldy processes that interfere with quick response. But in Macy's case, as at other companies we've studied, the established routines helped to expedite matters.

Companies can also set up new routines or networks designed specifically to accelerate aid in the event of a crisis. After a Cisco employee developed a medical emergency while visiting Japan and couldn't find an English-speaking health care provider, the company wanted to make sure that no other employee would ever feel so alone in such a frightening circumstance. So it designed a network that would furnish medical assistance to any member of the Cisco family traveling abroad. Interestingly, that network has proved valuable in unexpected ways. In 1998, for instance, civil strife in Indonesia put Jakarta-based employees in the midst of conflict. The company Cisco used to provide international health services sent an ambulance to Cisco's Jakarta headquarters—an ambulance could travel through the streets where no ordinary car could. Employees were loaded into the ambulance, hidden beneath blankets, and driven to a deserted army airstrip where a waiting aircraft took them to safety.

From the Bottom Up

It's essential to note that organizational response doesn't have to start at the top. Leaders need to recognize and support instances where spontaneous organizing and compassionate actions occur at the lower levels of a company. When the organizational context emphasizes and inspires compassionate responses, bottom-up initiatives can take hold and have a transformative effect. Indeed, much of the assistance following the fire at the University of Michigan was generated by staff and students. One student, who did not even know the victims very well, organized more than 40 other students to re-create all the classroom notes from two years of MBA studies and delivered the study materials to the victims within a week of the fire.

At Foote Hospital in Jackson, Michigan, employees wanted to help a colleague who had lost three close rela-

tives, so they lobbied for a system that would let them donate vacation or personal time to others who needed extra days off. Donating time has now become an official policy at Foote – although, of course, contributions are voluntary – thanks to the initiative and innovative thinking of people at the staff level of the organization. This program took on new life in the wake of the attacks in New York and Washington, DC. Foote employees donated more than \$18,000 worth of their vacation time to the Red Cross relief fund – again, at their own initiative – and the hospital matched this amount.

At *Newsweek*, one employee organized a blood and platelet donation drive when Maynard Parker fell ill, another managed home chores for Parker's family, and yet another babysat his children. Another bottom-up response arose when Morgan Stanley was devastated by the World Trade Center attacks and had no immediate way to keep track of who was affected. Customer-service representatives from another division of the company took the initiative to organize a vital service: They collected employee information and created a Web site to help the company respond to the needs of individual families.

As these stories show, organizational compassion can be contagious. Indeed, what we call "positive spirals of compassion," where one act of compassion inspires another, are common. At the University of Michigan, for example, MBA students organized a fund-raiser to support victims of the huge earthquake in India last May. When they heard about the relief effort, the leaders of several student clubs contributed the remainder of their club budgets to the drive.

The Case for Compassion


It's hard to document the positive effect that organizational compassion has on employee retention and productivity, but it's clear that employees will reward companies that treat them humanely. On December 11, 1995, a fire destroyed the Malden Mills manufacturing plant in Massachusetts. Instead of taking his \$300 million insurance payout and relocating or retiring, owner Aaron Feuerstein decided to rebuild the factory. He announced that he would keep all 3,000 employees on the payroll through December while he started to rebuild. In January, he said he would pay them for a second month, and in February, Feuerstein pledged to pay for a third. His generosity made quite an impact on his employees: Productivity at the plant nearly doubled once it reopened.

Conversely, the costs of not providing leadership and the organizational infrastructure to help people deal with

their grief are considerable. People in pain tend to be distracted at work, and if they don't have appropriate outlets, they may become unresponsive and even uncooperative in dealing with colleagues and customers. Just as compassion can be contagious, so can the detachment that accompanies a noncompassionate response; loyalty to the organization erodes not just among people who have directly suffered a tragedy but also among their colleagues who witness the lack of care. Over time, if an organization will not or cannot support the healing process, employee retention will suffer.

At one newspaper, a newsroom manager lost his wife to breast cancer. During his wife's extended illness, the employee felt no compassion from his boss; instead he endured complaints about his relatively low level of production. On his first day back to work after the funeral his boss said, "I guess you'll be working those 12-hour days again." The journalist, who was now raising two young children on his own, quit.

In another example, a health care employee finally got pregnant after many years of trying, only to deliver a still-born baby in her eighth month. When the woman's boss stopped by her hospital room, she assumed he was there to offer his condolences. Instead he had come to ask her when she would return to work. Shocked at his lack of compassion, the woman applied to be transferred to another unit, and her manager – who ran a very busy and stretched unit – lost a valued employee with more than ten years of experience.

As a colleague of ours once remarked, there is always grief somewhere in the room. One person may be feeling personal pain due to a death in the family. Another may find personality conflicts in the workplace unbearable. Still another may be watching a colleague struggle with a serious illness and not know how to help. You can't eliminate such suffering, nor can you ask people to check their emotions at the door. But you can use your leadership to begin the healing process. Through your presence you can model behaviors that set the stage for the process of making meaning out of terrible events. And through your actions you can empower people to find their own ways to support one another during painful times. This is a kind of leadership we wish we would never have to use, yet it is vital if we are to nourish the very humanity that can make people – and organizations – great. 



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