

Compassion

by Douglas Noll
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Compassion is one of the great unheralded traits of business leadership. Compassion requires you to subjugate your own need for attention and self esteem to the needs of others around you. You care and you are sincere in your caring. True compassion in the business world is very rare. Many people confuse sympathy with compassion. They believe they are being compassionate when they are really being sympathetic. Sympathy is feeling other's suffering with a desire to be helpful. Compassion is unconditional acceptance with the ability to see the essence in all things. Compassion goes right to our hearts and says, "I see you. I know you. You are valued and needed."

Considered the highest expression of humanness, compassion is not a single virtue but a distillation of all the virtues. Compassion is a blend of fairness, kindness, gentleness, honesty, respect, courage and love. If, in our daily response to life, we express appropriately any or all of these virtues, we are compassionate beings. Compassion is not sympathy nor is it emotional, and the compassionate person is not easily affected by the emotions of others. Compassion, like empathy acknowledges the emotions of others without entering into or being swayed by these emotions. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a being of compassion. Compassion is a state of consciousness.

How is compassion relevant in the business environment? Every business involves relationships between people. We can choose the quality of each business relationship, from competitive and hostile, to neutral, to compassionate. Most of the time, we are not conscious about choosing the quality of our business relationships. Thus, we treat others from a posture of reactivity rather than presence. No one would dispute that cultivating positive relationships is good for business. Yet we spend almost no time and effort acquiring the habits and skills necessary to create harmonious relationships. I believe that compassion is a powerful business tool and leadership skill. Those that cultivate compassion will have a significant advantage over those that do not.

What about being too soft? When business people talk about being too soft or touchy feely, what they're really worried about is either a fear of exploitation or a fear of confronting themselves. Our competitive, individualistic culture conditions us to believe that we're self-reliant and able to stand alone without the help, support, or nurturing of others. Furthermore, to the extent that we need or seek help from others, we believe we show weakness. That weakness can be exploited against us and to other people's advantage.

Compassion is not about weakness. The ability to show true compassion is neither soft nor touchy feely. It requires great inner strength, courage, and power. It is one of greatest gifts one human can bestow on another.

How does one develop the capacity for compassion? Here is a seven step process that I find useful for cultivating compassion in my peacemaking practice.

Lesson: What is the lesson I wanted to learn regarding this person and the conflict we are experiencing?

Aspect: What is the aspect of myself this person is reflecting back to me?

Gift: What is the gift this person is giving me by playing his or her role?

Acceptance: Can I accept the role that this person has played, along with their actions, to help me learn this lesson?

Allowing: Can I allow myself to let go of my anger towards this person who played the role to help me learn the lesson?

Release: Can I release this person from blame?

Kindness: Now that I have released this person, can I be kind to him/her, and if so, how can I do it and when will I do it?

The benefits of compassion include inner peace and joy, bountiful and prosperous relationships with others, and a sense of competency and control over one's life. In a highly pressured business world, these are surely characteristics every successful person would strive for. However, as with many habits that are useful, developing compassion takes consciousness, effort, and practice. We each have an innate capacity for compassion, but must develop it like any other skill. If you decide to hone your capacity for compassion, exercise some compassion on yourself. You will make mistakes as you grow. Accept and cherish them because it is through these mistakes that you evolve into a compassionate leader.