

FORWARD THINKING



by MICHELE C. WIERZGAC

Carrying the Yoke

Demonstrating compassion at work

With no yoke to rely on, how does one continue to be effective at work? Does the suppression of feelings impact the work environment? Absolutely. (See the Toxic Restraint sidebar.) A demonstration of compassion within the workplace becomes the yoke for employees.

Many workplace cultures place extreme pressure on employees to be a consistent producer and to ignore anything personal and emotional in the office. It is unrealistic for managers and leaders to ask employees who are dealing with tragedies and crises to leave their emotions at home. The suffering and pain does not disappear.

The authors of *Leading in Times of Trauma* conducted three years of research at the CompassionLab, a joint project between the University of Michigan Business School and the University of British Columbia, and demonstrated that it is universally natural for humans to show compassion. But organizations either restrain compassion or create a culture of demonstrating compassion. The researchers clearly proved that expressions of compassion do heal.

A compassionate work environment allows employees to not use up their energy trying to hide their pain from others. Compassion is a critical component within the workplace because it maintains a high performance in others, lessens the immediate suffering of those directly affected by the trauma and increases company loyalty.

The researchers also identified three leadership skills and company practices that are critical in the workplace during times of suffering:

- Communicate some form of expression publicly and immediately.
- Personal involvement of leadership is critical.

- Ask the employees for help in expressing some form of compassion.

In *Toxic Emotions at Work*, Peter J. Frost writes that managers must adopt compassion to avoid the debilitating effects of pain on performance. Pain may be caused by an abusive boss to a sudden death. When suffering is recognized, it becomes a positive force for change. Research shows that if pain is ignored, the bottom line suffers. Humans require humane responses even though the world of business is harsh. Many leaders rate poorly at this skill.

In *What Good Is Compassion at Work?* the researchers have the following suggestions to help the healing process begin:

Create an environment where everyone can express how they feel (i.e., questions about well-being, words, gestures, listening, hugs, giving tangible materials such as money, flowers or food).

Create an environment in which those who experience or witness pain can find ways to alleviate their own and others' suffering (i.e., people offering or giving freely of their time, stepping in to help with a project, offering work schedule flexibility).

Colleagues do not want to burden others at work, but sorrow and emotional trauma are a big part of every human life. Sorrows do pass, but while managing pain, most employees want to express themselves, get over it, and have their bosses and colleagues back off for just a while.

Compassion is listening intently instead of making the judgment, "What's wrong with him today?" The workforce needs listeners. Listening to our colleagues only strengthens our relationships and our business partnerships. It

A YOKE IS A SMOOTH CONCAVE SHAPE made to fit around the back and neck of oxen or other draft animals, and is designed so the animals do not touch each other and the weight of the load is equally distributed.

Today when we hear the word yoke it is most often used to describe a person carrying a very heavy emotional load, or one who is filled with anguish. All of us know someone within our workplace or professional associations that are carrying heavy emotional loads.

There are tens of thousands of us who are dealing with or have dealt with personal issues and tragedies throughout our lifetime. Whether it's becoming a caretaker for a parent, the death of a child, diagnosis of a severe illness, a relationship breakup, financial problems, a job loss, or legal issues, there are many of our colleagues who are hurting and/or grieving.

Many employees have family or friends to share the load, but what about at work? Employees spend eight hours a day, five days a week in the business world and are taught not to share personal issues or care for others for fear of being perceived as weak or becoming distracted from the work.

is only human nature to show a little human kindness. The sufferers do not want advice—they want to be understood. Here is a challenge: Ask someone you know how they are doing, and really listen.

One thing we know for sure: Genuine compassion and empathy heals every hurting human soul and lightens their yoke. ☀

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Toxic Restraint

A vice president of a Fortune 500 company shared with me how she carefully crafts a message about herself within her workplace. She spends a lot of energy controlling exactly what she wants them to know. Five years ago, her disabled husband died. Only two people within her inner circle knew about the facts, but did not know her feelings. She warns, "You must be cautious—there is a dividing line of secrecy. You do not want to be perceived as weak because it will be used against you. Once an employer smells weakness that is how they will always perceive you; they will never focus on your competencies. If you tell too much, the respect disappears. My advice: Act out a part every day."

Sharing the Yoke

At a professional association meeting, a long-time colleague and I were catching up with each other. Using the familiar phrase, "How are you doing," he began to tell me about his mom's long struggle with Alzheimer's and eventual death in February of this year. As I intently listened, he spoke of the many years traveling back and forth every month to visit his mom.

"My mom and I had an agreement that I would be there the whole weekend for her while the rest of the week was time for work," he told me. "Looking back now, Michele, I don't know how I did it with my busy schedule, but I do know one thing for sure: My boss understands compassion to the core. When I told her that my mom was in the hospital, her immediate response was, 'Well what are you doing here? Give me your notes—we'll make it happen.' Was I distracted? At times, yes. Was I upset? At times, yes. Was I able to perform my duties and responsibilities—absolutely."

A compassionate culture within the work environment allowed him not to use extra energy trying to hide the pain from others. He is back at work and has become that much more effective.

Resources

- Jane E. Dutton, Peter J. Frost, Monica C. Worline, Jacoba M. Lilius, and Jason N. Kanov, *Leading In Times of Trauma*. Harvard Business Review, 2002
- Jacoba M. Lilius, Monica C. Worline, Jane E. Dutton, Jason N. Kanov, Peter J. Frost, and Sally Maitlis, *What Good Is Compassion at Work?* Paper presented at the National Academy of Management Meetings, Seattle, 2003
- Peter J. Frost, *Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict*. Harvard Business School Press, 2003.
- Christianity Today.com, *Compassion Fatigue: Why Don't I Care About My Coworkers and Customers Anymore*. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/workplace/articles/compassionfatigue>
- Cheryl A. Kuba, *Where Is It? A Caregiver's Journal of Records, Resources, & Personal Reflections*. Aging Parents Solutions, 2004.