

The Case for Compassionate Leadership



Why Empathy Just Isn't Enough for Leaders Who Want to Create Real Change

By Michelle Maldonado

With the groundbreaking work of researchers such as Brené Brown and others, we have learned much about the power of empathy at work, at home, and in life as fuel for us to heal, connect, set [healthy boundaries](#), and create [psychological safety](#).





While empathy is a critical element needed to transform leaders and organizations, it (along with sympathy) form the foundation for us to take wise action. Empathy is the building block to develop compassion, through which we really find meaningful connection and transformation. If we consider a multi-layered definition of compassion, it is easier to understand the important role that empathy plays. For argument's sake, one might define compassion as:

- (a) The ability to experience and understand what others feel
- (b) while simultaneously maintaining a clear discernment about what are our own and others' feelings and perspectives may be. -and-
- (c) in the midst of this experience, asking what will truly serve the highest and best outcome for others, and not just for ourselves.

If you parse this definition, you will see a notable pattern arise – one that recognizes the inter-related nature of sympathy, [empathy](#), and compassion. One could argue that part (a) may be considered as “sympathy” and is a necessary building block for the cultivation of empathy. Similarly, parts (a) and (b) together help create empathy, which is a necessary building block for

our capacity to be compassionate. With this goal in mind, we could then describe compassion as empathy in action fueled by the desire to do what will truly serve. With this third element, compassion helps keep us out of empathic distress and burn out, and instead enables pro-social behavior and positive feelings. (Singer and Klimecki, 2014.)

As we collectively struggle to skillfully navigate the terrain of complex work environments as well as ever changing national and global dynamics, each of us is challenged to maintain emotional balance, to cultivate clarity of heart and mind, to discover and mitigate [our biases](#) (implicit and explicit) and move within the context of systemic frameworks that were designed to favor a few over the many.

As leaders of today's communities and organizations, we are called on not only to do better, but to be better. That brings us to the journey of reconstituting our states of being so that we see, understand, and embody compassion as a way of being that informs our moment-to-moment doing.

A Case for Compassion in Leadership

Let me tell you a story.

When I was in college and just learning about the legacy and impact of many U.S. multi-national corporations (MNCs) operating in foreign countries, I remember being on a flight from Boston, MA to Houston, TX as I went to visit family. I was reading a book about the impact of MNCs in Mexican and Central American communities and, more specifically, about the darker side of the economic flourishing that American companies were experiencing as they drained local resources, polluted the environment, and created harmful and abusive work conditions such as those well-known at [maquiladoras](#) in Mexico at the time.

A gentleman sitting next to me noticed the book I was reading and asked me about it. He was a middle-aged man who later shared with me details about his family and how he earned his wealth from the Texas oil industry. Even then, it was clear to me that while he worked hard for the life he enjoyed, it did not come without the benefit of great economic and other privileges. These privileges, as my 20-something year old mind viewed them, significantly influenced his access to opportunities, success, and corresponding behavior and perspectives on how to treat others and lead organizations.

During our conversation, I explained that the book explored how American companies took advantage of foreign communities and resources and helped create cycles of economic poverty and dependence rather than the much touted prosperity for all. Mr. Bill (I will call him that) quickly took issue with my agreement of the book's claim that U.S. companies were found to "take advantage" of others in pursuit of the almighty dollar.

However, the basis for his disagreement was not what I expected. He said, *"Those people don't know they are being taken advantage of. If people don't know or don't think they're being taken advantage of, then we are not taking advantage of them."*

A Revelation

I could not believe my ears. I felt a sensation of heat rise in my belly, travel through my chest, and then pause at my throat as I reflected on the significance of what this executive and high-powered leader with financial means and influence was actually saying. I knew I had to respond in a way that did not shut down the conversation or risk him dismissing me as a wide-eyed optimist who did not understand how the world worked.

So, I inventoried all the mental notes I had taken during our conversation and remembered how he spoke of his daughter with so much love and pride. It was there that I found a response I knew he would understand and to which he would relate.

"If people don't know they're being taken advantage of, then it's not really taking advantage of them."

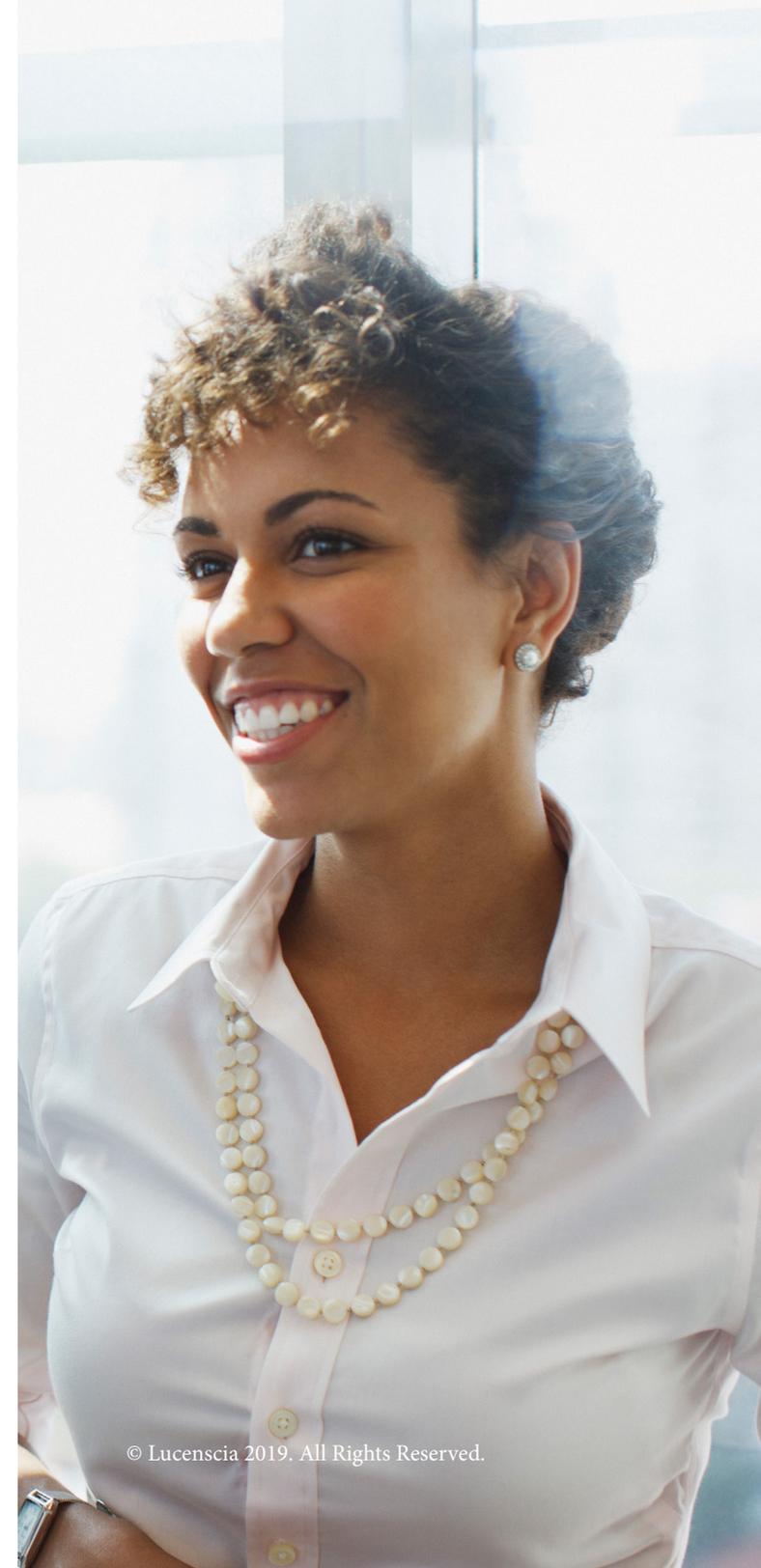
Taking a breath, I slowly began, “So, if I understand correctly, you are saying as long as someone does not know they are being taken advantage of, then it’s ok?” His reply, without blinking or pausing, was a swift, assured, and undeniable, “Yes, that’s correct.”

I then began to offer him a scenario to consider. I painted a picture of his dear, beloved daughter who was an intelligent, kind, self-motivated young woman with great potential who wanted to do meaningful work and do good in the world. I then described a situation where his daughter fell in love with a man who did not love her in return. Instead, he knew she had financial means and came from a family with money. He made her feel incredible, loved, and as if they would spend a lifetime together. All the while, this man was simply using her to access money and things for her to buy him (like cars, electronic devices, vacations, housing and more). He offered her empty promises as he took advantage of her day, after day, after day.

I asked him to imagine that he could see it, his wife could see it – everyone, except his daughter, could see that she was being taken advantage of. I paused here for a moment and then asked, “Would you say that your daughter is not being taken advantage of because she believes he loves her and does not think he’s taking advantage?” As I looked at him, his eyes revealed how troubling it was for him to consider this. He looked at me and quietly replied, “Yes, yes, he would be taking advantage of my daughter and that would be devastating and have a lasting impact on her.”

A Shift

It was in that moment that the door opened for a conversation about compassionate leadership and how we focus on our positions rather than on our shared interests. It was in this moment that he was able to see through his daughter how he had been showing up as a leader. And, it was in this moment that he was able to see that everyone is someone’s precious child and maybe, just maybe, it impacted how he chose to lead going forward.





A Word About Organizational Impact

In the definition of compassion above, one of the elements is to ask what would truly serve. As leaders, we are asked daily to make decisions that would serve the whole, but often make ones that serve only a few. These outcomes are being challenged in the world of work today. As leaders, we are called more and more to lead well through being well – to do our inner work so we can create positive outer impact.

The good news is that there are several leaders who are answering the call to lead well by being well (or did so while in positions of power). Leaders such as Rose Marcario (CEO of Patagonia), Paul Poleman (Former CEO of Unilever), Satya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft), Kenneth Chenault (Former CEO of American Express) and others. For a look at an integrated view of organizational leadership that incorporates compassion, and supports healthy relationships and operating practices, we need only look to companies such as LinkedIn and SAP for their compassion and mindfulness initiatives, respectively. Or, for a broader view, consider what are known as "[Firms of Endearment](#)." In a book by the same name written by Rajendra Sisodia, Jag Sheth and (the late) David B. Wolf, we see through surveys and performance measurements, that these types of organizations tend to outperform the S&P 500 by a factor of 14 when measured over a 15-year period. For leaders who need "proof," we are beginning to see them in the numbers.

Similarly, in the book, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*, Frederic Laloux explains how each time humanity has shifted to a new stage of consciousness, it also has invented a radically more productive organizational model that included new ways of leading and being in human interactions. We are in the midst of another shift today as more of us demand alignment of individual and organizational purpose and values.

We are fast approaching a crescendo that is slowly deconstructing organizational frameworks along the way that not only invites in new (or renewed) conversations about privilege, equity, and bias, but also about new ways to thrive as connected communities in ecosystems that were not constructed with an original intention to include everyone at the table.

Notably, more leaders, more often, are stepping into courage and action by first cultivating their own capacities to see, do, and be better, and then enabling the same cascading affect through their leadership ranks and organization.

In this way, we are beginning to strip away historical behaviors that lack compassion, insight, and awareness, but fuel “belonging and unity,” which may, perhaps, signal a higher and more elevated sense of diversity and inclusion – one that inspires expressions of compassionate leadership as well as a felt sense of individuals being heard, valued, and seen within the organizational context.



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A Compassion Plus Toolkit

To help each of us be accountable in our quest for compassionate leadership and to help others do the same, we need an improved leadership toolkit. To help us along the way, below are 10 key tips and practices:

- 1. Compassion.** Compassion is the glue that fuels the nature and quality of our leadership presence. Exercise self-compassion and compassion for others at work, at home, and at play.
- 2. Awareness.** Cultivate awareness of self, others, and your surroundings (including organizational, community and societal systems) as well as core emotional intelligence competencies.
- 3. Mindfulness.** Ground yourself in a regular practice of mindfulness to cultivate empathy, compassion, clarity of mind, and well-being.
- 4. Bias.** Discover and become aware of the impact of your biases – both implicit and explicit. Then work to mitigate the impact of your biases through continued self-discovery, civil discourse, systems change, self-management, and by offering kindness and seeing the similarities you share with others.
- 5. Values & Purpose.** There is a saying that if you stand for nothing, you fall for everything. So be intentional about what you stand for in a way that allows for open dialogue and other perspectives, while honoring all members of the stakeholder community.
- 6. Resilience.** Cultivate your capacity for inner calm and emotional and cognitive resilience by being introspective, practicing self-compassion, and maintaining a growth mindset.
- 7. Psychological Safety.** In order to create the conditions for creativity, innovation, and connection, be clear in words and deeds about the norms of our organizations. Model them, empower others to do the same and hold each accountable.
- 8. Courage.** Thuptin Jinpa, a scholar and principal English translator for His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, is known to say, “Having compassion for others frees us from fearing ... it turns our attention outward, expanding our perspective, making our own problems ... part of something bigger than us that we are all in together.” We must summon our courage to do the work that is before us for the benefit, not just of our organizations, but for the benefit of humanity.
- 9. Vulnerability.** If we truly wish to do our inner work for outer impact, it will require us to find some peace and equanimity with our vulnerability and to have the courage to move forward in the midst of its palpable presence.
- 10. Love.** Yes, love. We must remember that we are part of a common humanity. There is only one race – the human race. All else are fabricated mechanisms to enhance and sew divisiveness and separation. Through the embodiment and practice of love of self and others, we lean into the call to create better versions of ourselves, our organizations, and the world.

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Resources

1. Brené Brown (empathy and healthy boundaries) <https://www.facebook.com/theworkofthepeople/videos/bren%C3%A9-brown-on-empathy-compassion-and-boundaries/10153967066765682/>
2. Psychological Safety: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>
3. Empathy white paper <https://evanthompsondotme.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/jcs-empathy.pdf>
4. Unconscious bias <https://www.flipsnack.com/Lucenscia/lucenscia-insights-summer-2019.html>
5. Maquiladoras <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1990/08/30/US-companies-maquila-plants-said-to-be-rife-with-workplace-hazards/PARA/8590651988800/>
6. Firms of Endearment <http://www.informit.com/articles/article.aspx?p=2176196&seqNum=2>
7. Reinventing Organizations <https://www.reinventingorganizations.com/>



About Michelle

Michelle Maldonado is CEO of Lucenscia, a human capital development and business strategy firm dedicated to developing leaders and organizations with positive impact in the world. She is a Certified Genos International Emotional Intelligence Practitioner® and one of a handful of the Google-inspired Search Inside Yourself (SIY) Certified Teachers.® Michelle was named “Top Corporate Leader” by HR.com’s Leadership Essentials and “Woman of The Year” by the National Association of Professional Women. As a recommended speaker in SHRM’s Speaker’s Bureau, her work has been featured across industry publications and venues including The Mindful Leadership Summit, Training, Leadership Excellence, and Chief Learning Officer. Michelle@Lucenscia.com | www.lucenscia.com



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