

Compassionate leadership

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Hippocrates said 'Where there is a love of medicine, there is a love of humanity'. As an oncologist, this resonates deeply with me. It is a constant reminder of why I work in healthcare: to help and care for others. We all work in a remarkable field and all of us want to provide high-quality care for patients. How can every member of staff be enabled to achieve this? Can compassionate leadership be the model we should all embrace in our teams and organisations and as leaders at every level?

Here is a personal story. I am waiting in the emergency room, holding David, my two-year-old son, with severe breathing difficulty. He is in so much distress it is difficult for the nurses to assess him. In my professional life I am the one that does the caring – suddenly experiencing healthcare through the eyes of a patient was eye-opening. The really simple things started to matter. It can be easier to observe these things when you are on the receiving end. David has had a few events since then and every time it is the compassionate behaviour of the staff that helps us the most.

Compassion is 'a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it'.¹ It is a universal human value and a moral imperative in everyone in health care. It has four aspects: attending, understanding, empathising and helping. There is strong evidence suggesting that compassionate care leads to greater patient satisfaction and better outcomes which has a positive impact on staff wellbeing.²⁻¹³ Organisations with a culture of compassion have reduced employee exhaustion and absenteeism, increased psychological engagement, increased productivity and teamwork ethos.¹⁴ To sustain high-quality and compassionate care for every patient requires compassionate leadership at all levels.

While there is much evidence of the beneficial effects of compassion on patient outcomes, service users and healthcare providers, is compassion a lived behaviour? A Royal College of Physicians' survey of 500 junior doctors reported that 70% had worked on an understaffed a rota; 80% felt their work caused them excessive stress and 25% felt

their work had a serious impact on their mental health.¹⁵ Research report the rate of workplace stress is 40% higher in NHS staff than in the rest of the UK population.¹⁶ A study from 2012 reported that 56% of physicians have no time for compassion.¹⁷

Perhaps you have seen this in your workplace or experienced it yourself. Recently, as I walked down the corridor to my office, I saw a junior doctor sitting on a bench with a child holding a teddy bear and a phone playing Peppa Pig. I asked, 'Is everything ok?' She replied, 'Her mum is dying. Her dad is in with her mum. I was in the room and I suddenly thought it wasn't the right place for her to be'.

I was so proud of that young doctor. We need doctors like them. But how can we protect these doctors from burning out? How can we ensure that we, our teams and our organisations support them? We need to sustain them, not lean on them. We need a healthcare system that is compassionate to both the child and the doctor.

Medicine meets leadership

Michael West, Professor of Work and Organisational Psychology at Lancaster University and Senior Fellow at the King's Fund, suggests there are four main aspects to leading with compassion. First, it is about leaders who pay attention to those who they lead. Second, it is about leaders understanding the challenges being faced by those they lead. Third, is empathising with those they lead, feeling the strains and pressures without being overwhelmed, which gives leaders the motivation for the fourth step; asking 'How can I help? How can I serve?' The fourth step enables action to help and support the people we lead. Leaders at all levels need to embody these behaviours to support a culture of compassion.

Mr Paul O'Neill, former US Secretary of the Treasury and CEO of Alcoa suggests every leader should challenge themselves with three questions:¹⁸ Are members of staff:

- Treated with dignity and respect by everyone they encounter?
- Given the tools and support they need to do the work that adds meaning to their life?
- Valued and recognised for their work and what they bring to the teams and organisation?

Compassionate leaders demonstrate humility, positivity and inclusiveness.¹⁹ They celebrate diversity, embrace innovation, create a culture of psychological safety to

share worries, report errors and celebrate excellence.²⁰⁻²² The preconditions for this are self-compassion and self-awareness. We won't be able to lead with compassion unless we are compassionate towards our selves.²³⁻²⁵ We won't be able to understand others unless we have clarity and awareness of our self, values and beliefs.

So what is compassionate leadership?

Compassionate leadership is effective leadership, ensuring direction, alignment and commitment.²⁶ It is inclusive, embodying a sensitive approach to the challenges staff are facing and a commitment to support them and supply the tools to overcome challenges and thrive.²⁷ Compassionate leaders acknowledge excellence, good effort and achievements by expressing gratitude. They create psychological safety enabling all to speak up and discuss concerns and errors and promote autonomy. Compassionate leadership is a precondition to innovation and improvements.^{23,28}

In 2015, I became the lead for the Scottish Sarcoma Network. There have been moments in my leadership journey where my own perceptions challenged me. I knew I didn't fit the model of senior, dominant, command and control leadership, dictating direction of travel. So, I asked myself, what kind of leader I wanted to be? Do I want to inspire or do I want to scare? The outputs could be the same. However, the journey counts. It is the journey that supports individuals and teams to be inclusive and cohesive, creating trust and enabling growth. It was a transitional, challenging and very reflective journey. It was also wonderfully rewarding: watching the network grow, collaborate across boundaries and co-create care with patients and carers. I learned that the job of a leader is not to be in charge, but to take care of those in my charge.

If as Hippocrates said there is a love of medicine, let us shine this love back to our professional life, teams and organisations by leading with compassion.

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Declared interests

National Lead for the Scottish Sarcoma Network

References

References are available online.