

Compassionate followership: The emotional side of leadership

Kathryn Waddington

*Compassionate followers need compassionate leaders, and vice versa.
You cannot have one without the other.*

This short paper addresses the need for, and the qualities of, compassionate followership. But first, let us pause for a moment, and consider the following scenario:¹

*London, and the Proms² season is in full swing.
The Royal Albert Hall is full.
Anxious anticipation of a five-thousand strong audience still noisy but now seated in this famously elegant, tiered hall.
The lights change, no longer exposing the audience to itself, instead, illuminating some aspects of the stage.
A single beam of light, a single person walks onto the stage.
Tumultuous applause.
The long-awaited virtuoso soloist has arrived.
The soloist stands still as if affixed to the stage.
They look at the audience, their instrument suspended, untuned.
The audience looks down at this speck of a human being standing below.
Both sides of this great divide are transfixed and mesmerized by each other. Anxiety and anticipation rise in both.
Then, unexpectedly, and rather irritatingly the soloist speaks.
They should not be allowed to use their own voice but speak to us only through their instrument.
They say: 'It is kind of lonely and scary down here'.*

This scenario can be viewed as a metaphor for leadership and followership. The audience represents followers who have high expectations, and who can be highly critical if their expectations are not met. The soloist represents the leader who has the power and expertise to give followers what they want and expect. By saying 'it is kind of lonely and scary down here' they are exposing their emotions and their own human frailty and vulnerability. This is why leaders need compassionate followers. But first, let us briefly consider what compassionate followership is *not*.

What compassionate followership is not

Leaders face tough choices and decisions that may not be fully available to – or appreciated by – followers. Compassionate followership should be part of a wider organisational culture of compassion,³ one in which compassion flows freely up, down and across all organisational roles and relationships. This is different to what has in the past been described as 'reverse flow', a term arising from research and coined in a social work setting in the USA over 25 years ago⁴ by William Kahn. Kahn's study illustrated a number of patterns of caregiving, ranging from care and compassion flowing from effective and considerate leaders to their followers, to that described as barren. In barren organisational environments leaders and followers withdraw from each other, creating relationships of disengagement, alienation

¹ Halina Brunning (ed) *Psychoanalytic Essays on Power and Vulnerability* (Routledge 2018) xv–xvi.

² The Proms is an eight-week summer season of classical music, which was founded in 1895.

³ Kathryn Waddington 'Understanding and creating compassionate institutional cultures and practices' in P Gibbs, J Jameson & A Elwick (eds) *Values of the University in a Time of Uncertainty* (Springer 2019) 241–60.

⁴ William A Kahn 'Caring for the caregivers: Patterns of organizational caregiving' (1993) 38 *Administrative Science Quarterly* 539–63.



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and emotional absence. Reverse flow, on the other hand, was characterised by followers giving unreciprocated care and compassion to leaders who were emotionally distant and unavailable. While the concept of reverse flow may not be entirely relevant to twenty-first century business settings, it is included here as a point for readers to reflect upon in their own experiences of the emotions expressed in the relationships between leaders and followers.

Compassionate followership

Compassion is a complex concept that can be understood on many levels: from neuroscience at the individual level, to interpersonal relationships, to people and sentient beings beyond those we know, and globally.⁵ In an organisational and business context⁶ compassion encompasses: (i) noticing that suffering is present in an organisation; (ii) making meaning of that suffering; (iii) feeling empathic concern; and (iv) taking action. Compassion also involves kindness – the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate – which some consider a neglected aspect of leadership.⁷ But kindness and compassion are not necessarily synonymous. Compassion without action remains at the level of ‘kind words’ and kind words alone are not enough.

Followership is a more straightforward concept.⁸ It is the ability to take direction well, to be part

as how well leaders lead. Effective followers have a number of qualities, including:

- *Judgment*: followers must take direction, but with an underlying obligation to do so when the direction is ethical and appropriate.
- *Honesty*: followers owe their leaders an honest and forthright assessment of what they are trying to achieve.
- *Courage*: it takes courage to give honest assessment and feedback; leaders also need the courage to listen.
- *Self-compassion*: this involves treating oneself with kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness.

Leaders need compassionate followers for a number of reasons. Firstly, self-compassion is an important source of well-being,⁹ and this is equally important for leaders too. Secondly, followers’ judgement, honesty and courage are important qualities, for example, during periods of organisational change. The anxiety and anticipation evoked by the process of change can be a major barrier and source of resistance to change. Responses to organisational change can range along a continuum from ‘sycophant to saboteur’.¹⁰ Sycophant describes a response to change that is an unthinking and unchallenging state of followership. Saboteur describes a response where individuals or

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of a team and to deliver on what is expected of you. How well followers follow is just as important

groups consciously or unconsciously attempt to block change. Somewhere in between is a

⁵ Darwin International Institute for the Study of Compassion (DIISC), available at <https://diisc.org/what-is-diisc/> (accessed 15 July 2019).

⁶ Monica Worline & Jane Dutton *Awakening Compassion at Work* (Berrett-Koehler 2017) 3–11.

⁷ Gay Haskins, Mike Thomas & Lalit Johri (eds) *Kindness in Leadership* (Routledge 2018) 1–7.

⁸ John S McCallum ‘Followership: The other side of leadership’, available at <https://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/followership-the-other-side-of-leadership/> (accessed 8 July 2019).

⁹ Kristen D Neff ‘Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being’ available at https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/SC.SE_.Well-being.pdf (accessed 8 July 2019).

¹⁰ Linda Hoyle ‘From sycophant to saboteur – Responses to organizational change’ in C Huffington, D Armstrong, W Halton, L Hoyle & J Pooley (eds) *Working Below the Surface: The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations* (Karnac 2004) 87–106.

compassionate followership response, which is a response that offers support for change combined with constructive challenge. However, compassionate followers need compassionate leaders who listen and are open to challenge. What follows is an illustrative example of compassionate followership and leadership in action at the University of Westminster.

It's open plan – but not as we know it

As Head of the Department of Psychology, I was both a leader and a follower. Following an organisational restructuring, the department was relocating from one university faculty and campus to another in central London. Staff were accustomed to working in single-person and shared offices and were unhappy with the proposal to move to an open-plan working

environment. Although there were advantages to open-plan office environments in terms of opportunities for collaboration and communication, there were concerns about the negative impact on concentration, which is vital for thoughtful academic work. The solution was the adoption of an evidence-based management approach, blending evidence from empirical studies, internal data, staff expertise, values and concerns (see Figure 1).

Crucially, the university's senior management team listened to and acted upon the concerns expressed and the evidence presented. The outcome was a design that provided shared offices for staff and open spaces for interactions with students, and which won the architects an award for best public sector design.¹² Feedback from senior members of the project team

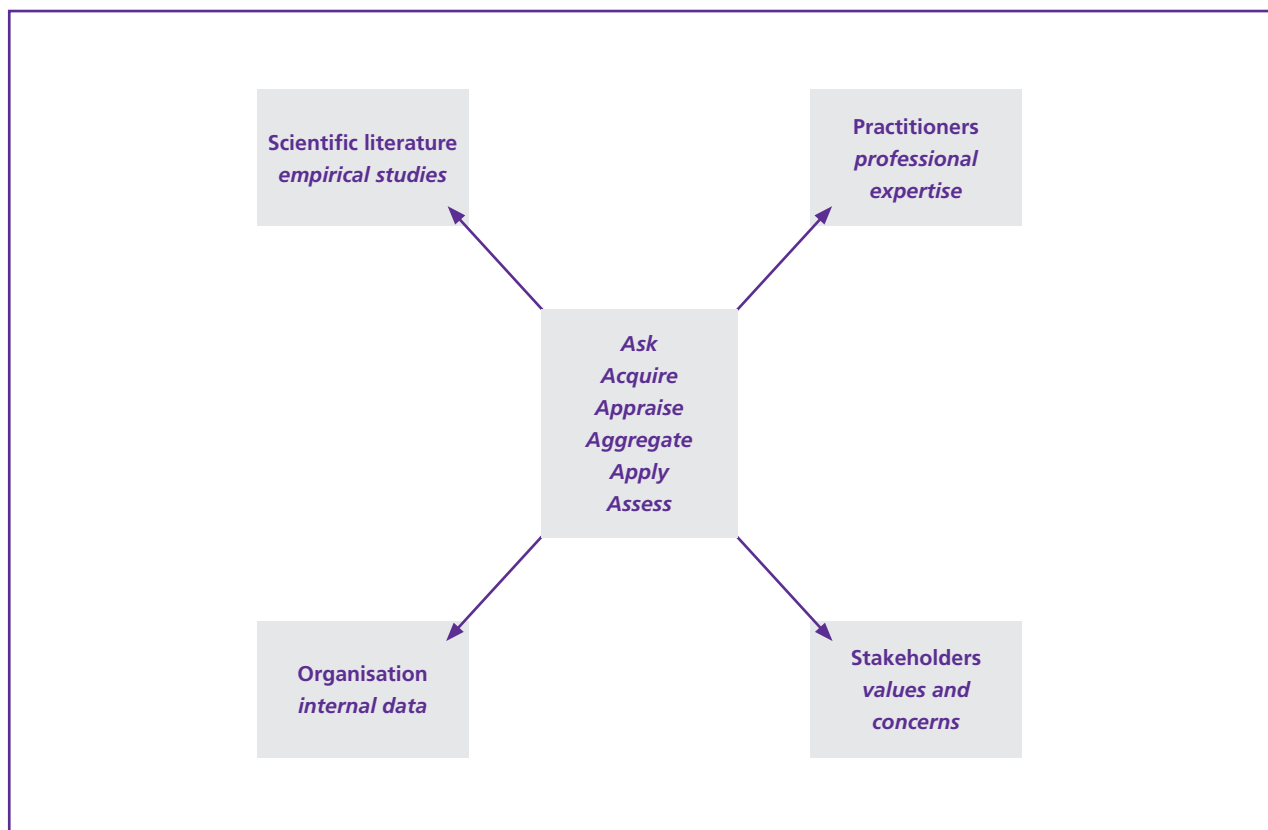


Figure 1: Evidence-based management¹¹

¹¹ Center for Evidence Based Management, available at <https://www.cebma.org> (accessed 8 July 2019).

¹² Best Public Sector at the FX Awards, available at <http://www.rocktownsend.co.uk/psychology-fx-winner> (accessed 8 July 2019).

and the staff was overwhelmingly positive, for example:

It was clear from the project brief that this was both a challenge and an opportunity. The end result represents a much more collaborative and flexible solution to enhance the way in which colleagues work.¹³

Just walking into the light-filled space puts one in the right frame of mind to be creative and productive. I really look forward to and enjoy my time at work now. The new layout has increased social interaction between staff and facilitated interaction with students. I feel creative, proud, peaceful, caring and open. I am much happier here.¹⁴

This example illustrates compassion in action in that:

- We were alert to the potential for suffering expressed in the concerns of staff;
- We made meaning of that suffering by adopting an evidence-based management approach;
- Our concerns and evidence were listened to with empathy; and
- The resulting action was a changed corporate decision.

Conclusion

Compassionate followers need compassionate leaders, and vice versa. You cannot have one without the other. Compassionate followers need to use their judgement wisely and act in ways that are ethical and appropriate. They also need self-compassion and the courage to give honest assessment and feedback. Leaders need the courage to listen with empathy, and also to be vulnerable. This highlights the importance of emotions, and the essential nature of leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers.

Kathryn Waddington is Reader in Work and Organisational Psychology and Course Leader for Business Psychology at the University of Westminster. Her current research interests include emotion in organisations, and the practices that promote and sustain compassion in action. She began her professional career in nursing at King's College Hospital in London and has a PhD in Psychology from the University of London, where she investigated the characteristics and role of gossip in nursing and healthcare organisations. She has published widely: the research monograph *Gossip and Organizations* (2012) and numerous articles and chapters that examine the role of gossip in organisational culture and climate, and its value as an under-used but important early warning signal of organisational failure.



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¹³ Director of Estates.

¹⁴ Composite of staff feedback.