

What Does a Compassionate Workplace Look Like? by Nir Eyal, Monica Worline

Monica Worline is Executive Director of the CompassionLab at the University of Michigan, a research scientist at the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University, and co-author of *Awakening Compassion at Work*, forthcoming in February 2017 from Berrett-Koehler. She sat down with author and entrepreneur Nir Eyal to discuss why empathetic teams make better business deals, how more caring leaders can help prevent corporate scandals, and the steps for cultivating compassion at work. This conversation originally appeared in *Heleo: In-Depth Conversations with the World's Leading Thinkers*.

Nir Eyal: What is the business case for compassion?

Monica Worline: Well, it might seem soft and fuzzy, but in fact, if you're trying to innovate quickly and telling people to fail fast, people hate to fail, and failing creates suffering. Compassion is a response to suffering, to alleviate that suffering. It is key to learning on the job. In the innovation space, compassion is at the heart of failing fast and recovering quickly.

NE: So your desire is to alleviate somebody else's suffering?

MW: Yes.

NE: It actually sounds like what we do in product development. In terms of designing good products and services, you've got to figure out what their pain is.

MW: That's right. You may never have used the word compassion, but when you're identifying somebody's pain point and you're trying to create something that alleviates it, that's actually compassionate product design.

NE: Fantastic. So it makes us better at designing the products. What else?

MW: It makes us much better at delivering a service. Service quality hinges on relationships, and relationships deepen when we listen and hear what's going on in someone else's life. We tune into something that might be causing them pain, and we respond in an authentic way. If you're running an organization where you really need people to be engaged and you want to retain those customers, there's a lot of research that shows that compassion is actually at the heart of employee and customer engagement. You get people much more deeply involved in their work when they can do it with compassion for the people they work with and for their customers.

NE: What's your favorite example of companies that do this really well? What are the most compassionate companies?

MW: I think there are a lot of pockets of compassion in almost every company. I don't actually tend to single out any one company, because it's much more than culture. A lot of people focus on organizational culture, but this is really about human-to-human relationships. There's a very broad study in the financial services industry—they looked across units in the same organization, and units vary widely in how compassionate they are. You might name one organization as compassionate, but it's actually sub-pockets within that organization.

Nir: I see. Cells within teams.

MW: Right. Units that are more compassionate in the financial services industry close more deals, keep more customers, and when they experience a downturn, they bounce back faster.

NE: This has actually been studied in that field?

MW: Yes.

NE: Why do these teams that are more compassionate close more business?

MW: They listen to their customers more. They hear what their customers' pain points are. They're able to adapt quickly to meet their customers' needs, and they respond more quickly to the downturn. They keep their customer engaged even when things are bad, often by sharing what's going on in their side of the equation and opening up the space for dialogue.

NE: What happens to you if you're not compassionate?

MW: There's some research that shows that not compassionate organizations are like ego systems. People become isolated. They drive their own success and they don't think about the success of other people. They might trample over their customers' needs in order to sell more or get ahead. Compassionate organizations are ecosystems where people realize that they're interdependent, tied together, they depend on each other for success. They may measure success in terms of team or group or collective success, or they might define success larger and include more stakeholders.

NE: Do you think that goes up and down the organization? Because particularly in Silicon Valley, we have this myth that the person at the top needs to have a big ego, to drive hard, to push people, and is not often portrayed as someone who's compassionate.

MW: The isolated hero as entrepreneur is really a myth. Most entrepreneurs need other people to succeed. They need people to get interested in what they're doing. They rely on a network of relationships and the stronger those relationships are, the more their business is lifted up—and when they encounter a problem, the more they can bounce back. We like to have the standout persona, but some research with top leaders shows that when you get into their inner circle, even if they cultivate that strong persona on the outside, they may be quite compassionate with their inner circle.

NE: Are there particular business leaders that exemplify what compassion should look like at the top?

MW: John Chambers at Cisco Systems. He was an interesting leader in technology because he actually believed that you could build a compassionate system. He gave Cisco a mandate—anywhere in the world, if something difficult happened to an employee, he wanted to know about it within 48 hours. The organization became compassionate because people were much more aware of all the suffering that happens at work.

NE: Yeah, there's some great stories about what he did, how he reached out to particular employees when they were suffering. How do we make sure that that still feels authentic, that it's not something that is just mechanized and routinized, but something that actually feels like it came from someone's heart?

MW: I think you know it by the interaction. Many of the people who interacted with him regularly knew he asked for that because he cared about it, not because he thought it was a manipulation to drive business. He really cared about people. I just heard a talk from someone at Southwest Airlines, which is another organization that has maintained a culture of heart. That seemed to come authentically from the founders, and it seems to be carried on in the leadership role modeling. Also, these routinizations of it are quite important for keeping it widespread, so organizations don't just end up being compassionate at the top.

NE: It's not just having it in your heart, but actually making it part of processes, part of systems within the organization?

MW: Yeah. When we talk to people about organizational change, one of the most invisible and unexpected ways that you can change an organization is by looking at your routines and saying, "How could I make each routine a little bit more empathetic or compassionate?"

NE: How can you be compassionate and hold people accountable at the same time?

MW: When you hold people accountable with a punitive point of view, they will do everything to buck the system. For instance, we're watching a scandal unfold at Wells Fargo right now, where people were held accountable to numbers that they couldn't achieve. The leadership of the organization seems to be unaware of or disregarding how many people were complaining that the organization was demanding accountability to something that was impossible. If you build true accountability systems that set your goals and hold people to those goals with a sense of what's human, people will develop more determination to meet the goal and more commitment to the organization. When you do accountability with compassion, that actually builds real human investment in meeting the goal instead of false extrinsic motivation.

NE: I heard that at Wells Fargo they wanted every customer to have eight products because eight rhymed with great, whereas in the average bank it's something like 2.2. This non-human, non-realistic goal drove people to do these illegal acts?

MW: There's a very in-depth study of the Enron corporate culture which sounds familiar to the reports we've had about Wells Fargo. There were unattainable goals set, in the service of creating wealth for a few people, and the elite part of the organization then distanced itself from the frontline of the organization. That created an immense amount of human suffering in the frontline, while other parts were buffered from it.

NE: Because they didn't have that feedback loop. People at the top couldn't see.

MW: That's a quintessential example of accountability without real compassion. Without real human connection to the conditions of work and what's possible and what motivates people.

NE: How do we do it? How do we cultivate more compassion with ourselves, for our customers, for our coworkers?

MW: Well, we talk about four steps to creating more compassion in ourselves.

The first step is noticing more. When we all get busy, distracted, or overloaded, we stop paying attention to the quality of other people's lives. So notice more and you'll automatically be more compassionate because you'll see that people are in pain.

The second step is to slow down enough to interpret more generously. When a colleague makes a mistake, for instance, your first interpretation if you're under a lot of pressure might be, "Stupid." If you slow down a bit and say, "They're trying, just like me. They're overloaded, just like me. I could understand how they might have made that mistake," that brings out more compassion in the system.

The third step is to cultivate your empathy. Empathy is the ability to feel concerned for what another person is going through, and if you interpret more generously, then that leads to the fourth step, which is stepping in to take action. So if you have a colleague who's so overloaded that they're making mistakes and you see it's likely they'll continue to do that, you may step in and offer to help. You may have a conversation with them about whether they're aware of the pattern that they're in. You may ask them if something else is going on in their life that's contributing to this, that you could help alleviate. Those are the personal steps. Noticing, interpreting generously, feeling more empathy, and then taking some action.

NE: Are there different ways to do this for customers, or are they the same steps?

MW: Same steps. When you have to resolve a problem quickly, you may ignore a lot of extraneous information that the customer is offering you—which is usually what else is going on in the customer's life that's causing them pain. If you pay more attention to the conditions that the customer is telling you about, you may be able to feel more empathy toward them, and also to offer them a different range of services or a different range of products that help meet a wider set of needs. So building compassion for the customer can also build your service and product offerings at the same time.

NE: Definitely. I was in a meeting once and we were trying to pinpoint the problem that the customer was having. One of the people in the room, said, "Why are people going to the next step?" The response was, "Well, the customer is stupid." Right then and there I was like, "This meeting is over."

MW: Right.

NE: If we blame the customer for being stupid, we're putting blame in the wrong place. We're not being empathetic at all. We are the problem. We design the product or service! Instead of jumping to, "The customer is stupid" or "My coworker is lazy" we should cultivate empathy and ask, "What else might be going on?"

Why do we jump to that? Why do we have that hair-trigger reaction to put blame

elsewhere?

MW: Psychologists call those appraisals. We do them really quickly and we tend to act off of our implicit biases. There's a lot of talk nowadays about implicit bias around race or gender, but we have implicit bias about all kinds of human behavior. As a designer, if you have been highly trained to pay attention to aesthetics, flow, and beauty, and then you see a customer doing something that looks to you like a horrendous decision, your implicit bias is, "That person is wrong. That thing is ugly. Get it away from me."

We tend to use our training, our background experience, our intellectual knowledge and development, whatever field we've been socialized in, as a set of background conditions. When we're under time pressure or put into a kind of box and we have to make a quick decision, we jump to a stereotypical point of view about other people that comes from those.