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The Power of Compassion

by Tricia Jack, CPPA

If you were to describe what compassion means, you'd probably suggest words such as caring, sympathy, sensitivity, kindness, and love: not words typically associated with the workplace. Yet compassion is a powerful leadership tool, and if balanced well with other qualities and tools, can help to create working relationships of trust and respect.

I once had a line manager who exuded compassion. I was having some troubles outside of work, so I went to tell him what was going on so that he understood why I wasn't being as productive as usual. He listened carefully, asked me some clarifying questions and then asked me what he could do to make work easier until the situation resolved. He wanted to help me. He allowed me to take a little time off to deal with the situation, and worked with me to reschedule some work plans to a more manageable deadline. This helped me, but it also helped him, because he made me feel that he actually cared about me as my manager, and in turn, that made me more loyal to the organization. He did not reduce my workload or lessen my responsibilities, but he helped me to manage it. I ended up respecting him even more and therefore worked harder and put more effort into my job.

Compassion is internal and often private and, therefore is not something we always wish to show at work for fear of being seen as weak or incapable. Yet in reality, compassion is just about putting others' needs before our own, while balancing the needs of the business or organization. Having compassion means being aware of others' needs and wanting to help them. The dictionary definition is: "Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."^[1] So, to be compassionate, we have to be *aware*, and that means we must communicate well with our employees.

There are many qualities that could be seen as being "compassionate." Some of these are flexibility, leading by example, honesty, and not being afraid to show some emotion. Of course, balance is important, but there is not much wrong with showing your more human side at times.

In these difficult times, are we so consumed with making things work that we forget to be compassionate? Are we under such great pressure to perform, to cut or maintain budgets, or to make tough decisions, that our compassion might be lacking?

When many of us are making difficult decisions regarding our organization and our employees, compassion is something we ought to have and can aspire to. We can be the hard-headed leader and show no mercy, or we can be "human," and show compassion. All of us who manage and lead people would do well to remember the words of the Dalai Lama: "Compassion is not religious business, it is human business; it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability; it is essential for human survival."

Is compassion essential? Food for thought.

^[1] Merriam-Webster Online

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