

The Compassionate Leader

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



As leaders, we have been taught in our business schools and corporate boardrooms to lead with our heads, not with our hearts. We're expected to be tough, bottom-line business people. The buck stops with us. But given the chain of horrific events that shook the world on September 11, the business world is now seeing significant changes in this behavioral pattern, as leaders of companies and organizations across the country and around the world embrace a more compassionate style of leadership --leading with the heart. Leaders have shown that they possess a more nurturing, caring management style by reaching out to the families of the victims through corporate giving campaigns, devoting precious print and broadcast advertising budgets to either express sorrow or show pride in America, rather than to sell a product. In the months and years ahead, there will be many more examples of compassionate leaders, the new heroes of our modern day society.

This shift toward becoming more caring, sympathetic leaders has given us all pause to reflect and ask ourselves: What does it take to become a compassionate leader? How can I empower my management teams and employees to become more caring when dealing with customers, clients and each other?

Compassion comes from a private place deep within us, and there aren't many opportunities to express it in our work environment. A simple definition of compassion is putting others' needs before your own, or being sympathetic to their needs. A results-driven leader who is accustomed to making rational decisions based solely on facts and numbers may feel isolated on the journey into this relatively unknown territory called compassion.

We saw male sensitivity in unlikely places after the September 11 tragedy. New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani took center stage, as he reported in almost up to the minute detail any news that he was able to share. He became the lead spokesperson for the state of affairs at Ground Zero. New York Governor George Pataki stood by Mayor Giuliani's side throughout the repeated news broadcasts, day after day, offering his state support to rebuild the city. President George W. Bush visited the site, sharing hugs and handshakes with firefighters and police officers from New York, Washington and across the country. We saw grown men on national television crying openly and uncontrollably. Our nation's leaders were shocked and devastated. Even David Letterman traded his comic banter for a more serious tone while interviewing CBS-TV news anchor Dan Rather, who broke his stoic façade and exposed his deepest grief. These were all leaders who we had never seen openly express their feelings. We had never seen them speechless. We had never seen them cry. And we realized that not even our civic, business or public leaders had all the answers. Today is a turning point for our country and for the world, one that will forever change the way we do business and interact with each other.

As we all reconsider the attributes of a compassionate leader, I offer these for consideration. A compassionate leader is someone who:

Communicates openly. The most visible change that occurred after the September 11 tragedy was people's willingness to communicate with others. People who had worked side by side for years but who rarely spoke were now openly talking and sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other. Just as important, people began asking sincere questions and listened with rekindled interest and intention. Within companies and organizations, leaders encouraged an open dialogue among teams and employees. Companies set up grief counseling for their employees. Others encouraged their staff to donate blood and make charitable contributions.

Is flexible. The leader who is willing to set aside rules and procedures for the greater good demonstrates his or her human side. We are all given choices in our professional lives. When you take the high road with employees, they never forget, and as a result, you develop more loyal employees, people who want to work for you because you care. You don't just pay lip service to a cause; you make a promise and keep it. By doing so you show that you genuinely care about their well-being.

Isn't afraid to show emotion. We are conditioned to believe that if we show our emotions in a business environment, people will think we are weak. That perception is changing. Two decades ago when Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder openly cried, she was ridiculed for being wimpy. People said she had no backbone, that she would get too emotional when faced with adversity. We now know that the leader who is not afraid to show emotion has greater depth of character and is not swayed by public opinion of what is "politically correct" behavior.

Leads by example. The actions of a leader who tries to be compassionate on the outside but does it more for winning votes or stroking his or her constituents is disingenuous. Nothing does more to build a person's character than getting down into the trenches in an hour of need. Our society has been challenged to re-examine the true meaning of the word "hero." We have learned that a hero is not someone who we idolize because of position, status or income but rather someone who genuinely, and humbly, puts others first

Is there a place for the compassionate leader in today's tough business climate? Absolutely! We have spent decades becoming more professional and businesslike, and in the process we have built impenetrable armor around ourselves. It's time to set ourselves free, and become more human and humane in the workplace. The compassionate leader brings a sense of balance and a fresh approach to doing business in the marketplace. While there will always be hard-hearted, bottom line executives to lead companies, in this new millennium, we may find that those who exhibit the characteristics of a compassionate leader will fare better in handling crises and communicating more effectively in any economic and social climate.

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