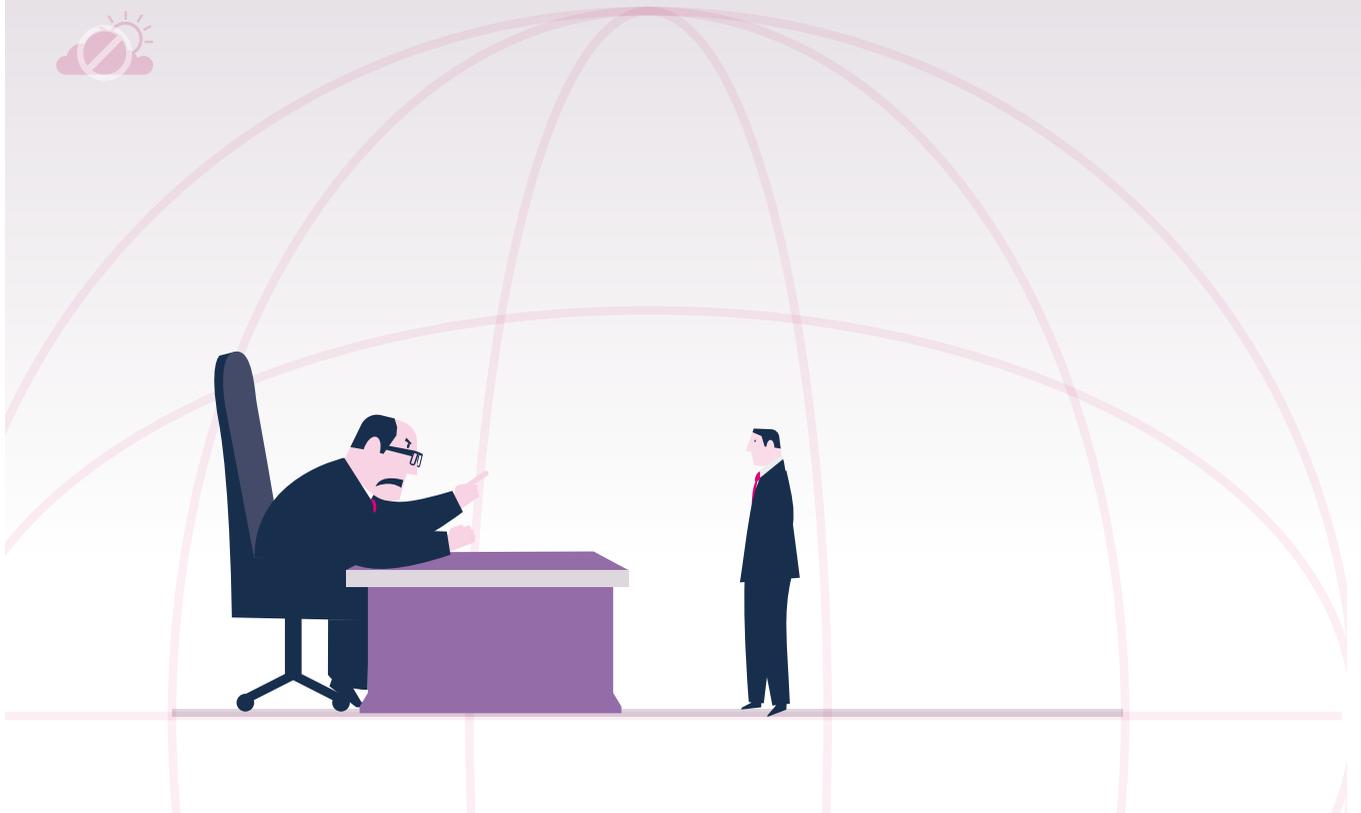




# The global workplace – a compassion-free zone?



**Michael Jenkins** outlines a new initiative to convince managers that compassion and caring are not 'pink and fluffy' irrelevances but key tools for business success



**A**t a conference recently I gave a presentation on Roffey Park's research into caring and compassionate leadership. I was struck by the feedback I received from a group of three men during the coffee break following my talk.

One was enthusiastic about what he had heard whereas the other two, both of whom were from the same international organisation, looked less certain. I suggested that they were not convinced by my arguments or by our model of compassion in the workplace and asked what they did not like.

Their answer surprised me. They said that it was not a question of liking or disliking either the content of my talk or the model. Their problem was that they had reflected on their own workplace and come to the rapid conclusion that as far as compassionate working was concerned, their organisation was about as far removed from a caring environment as it was possible to be.

"You see", they said dolefully, "the leadership in our place is highly political, cut-throat, narcissistic and aggressive. Our boss falls into your description of a classic corporate psychopath. He is a nightmare to work with. How on earth would we even begin to change such a culture? It exhausts us just thinking about it."

This remark set me reflecting about how the development of a caring and compassionate workplace is not something that can happen in the blink of an eye. Nor will it happen without people taking an active decision to change what they do not like about their workplace. To be even more specific: people who are not in leadership positions are going to find it harder to influence the corporate culture in a way that encourages people to be more compassionate in the workplace. They can help support organisational initiatives to make work time a better experience for all – but, to my mind, the lead has to be taken by managers and leaders from the outset.

Leaders (and not just the CEO and top team) are the ones who set the tone for the way the organisation is going to be. That means that leaders have to be convinced of the need to either massively upgrade the level of compassion in the workplace or build further and faster on any good work that might already have been done or work that has just been initiated.

“”

***People who are not in leadership positions are going to find it harder to influence the corporate culture, they can help support organisational initiatives, but the lead has to be taken by managers and leaders from the outset***

But why should we care about compassionate workplaces? After all, it sounds like a lot of hard graft.

Here are three key words as a starting point, even an encouragement to action:

- Engagement
- Productivity
- Results

We need to work a lot harder than we are currently to encourage people to associate these items with the word "compassion". At the present time the majority of managers in most organisations around the world suffer from what we might term "compassion blockers".

First and foremost, they associate compassion with something that is pink and fluffy, as it is thought of in the workplace at the moment, not something that real managers should concern themselves with. Why? Well, compassion at the moment infers kindness or softness, which in turn links in many people's minds with the dreaded word "weakness". We know from our work on compassion that people are anxious about being seen as a soft touch if they are "too compassionate" with their people.

Questions arise such as:

"How can I hold them accountable if I'm compassionate?"

"If I enquire too closely about what I sense are problems in their lives, won't that open up a Pandora's Box of issues that I just don't need to be dealing with at the moment?"

"Can't they just sort themselves out? I've got my own problems so I don't need more from other people."

“”

**Compassion in the workplace means that you are alive to the suffering of others, you have the personal resilience to undertake a set of compassionate acts, you do not judge people and you actually do something about the suffering of others**

And the list of compassion blockers goes on. What this tells us is that people need to be supported to become more compassionate; some need convincing that it is, in fact, the right thing to be doing; others need encouragement that as they exhibit compassion so then will others show compassion to them when they themselves are suffering or in need. A virtuous circle of compassion is what is required.

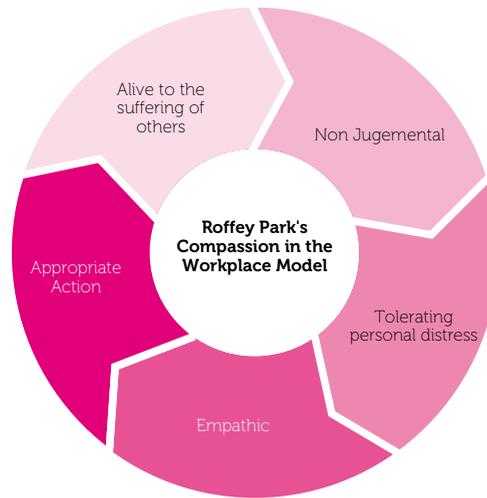
At Roffey Park we are clear that compassion is an active thing. Doing something about someone's suffering involves action and this is where we can differentiate between empathy (which is, of course, a good and desirable thing) and compassion. Empathy can mean people thinking: "I'm really sorry about your issues/your predicament – all the best! (But you're on your own on this one, mate!)."

Whereas compassion in the workplace means that you are alive to the suffering of others, you have the personal resilience to undertake a set of compassionate acts, you do not judge people (you do not think: "your problem is of your own stupid making, sort yourself out") and you actually do something about the suffering of others.

This way of looking at compassion (specifically in the context of the workplace) is based on five constructs which form the basis of Roffey Park's new "Compassion in the Workplace Index" (see Figure 1).

It is this "doing something about it" that makes our vision of compassion in the workplace a really compelling thing. We know from numerous studies that happy workplaces where people feel respected and valued are the ones that can look forward to better business results or outcomes.

Conversely, we know that workplaces that are compassion-free zones are populated with people who are constantly on the verge of burn-out, where interpersonal relationships are fractious and stressful, and where staff turnover is likely to be very high.



**Figure 1:**  
Compassion in the Workplace Index



“”

***We know that workplaces that are compassion-free zones are populated with people who are constantly on the verge of burn-out, where interpersonal relationships are fractious and stressful, and where staff turnover is likely to be very high***



In the many conversations we have had with our participants on programmes, seminars, workshops and conferences, we know that people are interested in finding out more about making the workplace (that part of their life where they spend so much time) a much better place to be. This is why we want to underscore the idea that compassion is not a woolly thing; in fact, it lies at the heart of engagement, which in turn – if you can get it right – has some fantastic outcomes (productivity and going the extra mile being just a couple in addition to well-being, high levels of energy and commitment).

The astonishing thing for us is that it is not just sectors where you might expect compassion to be absent (certain financial services functions, as reported to us by people working in those areas) but, worryingly, in the so-called “caring” industries too (and not just hospitals and care homes) but also in domestic and international charities where caring has become a thing that you do rather than a thing that you feel.

I was stunned when a group of people from a major humanitarian organisation said: “Oh, we don’t do compassion. We’re too busy caring for people”. These same individuals later shared with me this salutary reminder: “We have completely forgotten about compassion. This is very sad when we reflect on the fact that it was compassion that was the main driver for all of us to join the organisation in the first place, all those years ago”.

From this we can surmise that organisations might have been compassionate places in the past but that the culture has morphed into something else. Organisational compassion needs us to be constantly working at it.

So where does this leave us?

To our minds there is a lot more work to be done in terms of understanding compassion in the workplace and its related topic areas of self-compassion and organisational compassion.

At Roffey Park we have made a start we hope will help support those people in the workplace who are convinced, as we are, that more caring, more generous and more compassionate organisations are not just a pipedream; that with hard work, a committed leadership and the generation of some internal corporate momentum around compassion we do indeed have the potential to make some big changes for the better.

gf

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michael Jenkins is Chief Executive of Roffey Park (UK and Singapore). With Meysam Poorkavoos, project leader of the ‘Compassion in the Workplace Index’, he will be launching the new compassion tool in June 2016 ([www.roffeypark.com/cwi](http://www.roffeypark.com/cwi))