



THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**Compassionate Organizations**

*Nonprofit • Public Health • Public Service*

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# THE CASE FOR COMPASSIONATE ORGANIZATIONS

WHITE PAPER

Ari Cowan

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**Abstract** — The implementation of compassion values and practices is emerging as an approach to organizational development in a broad range of organizations worldwide. In this paper, the author explores the impact of compassion across all types of organizations (e.g., business, government, healthcare, education), why compassion is an essential competency, the consequences of failing to adopt compassion as a critical organizational operational component, and an example of the way in which organizations can progressively move their cultures into the compassion ethic.

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## Contents

In the digital (PDF) version of this document,  
you can click on the entry below to directly link to the entry topic.

In Brief .....	3
The Power of Applied Compassion .....	3
Organizations in General .....	3
Individual Practitioners and Small Organizations .....	4
Government Agencies.....	4
Healthcare, Health Services.....	4
High Human Contact Service Organizations .....	4
The Impact of Compassion Upon Organizations .....	4
Why Compassion! .....	4
The Advantage of Early Adoption.....	5
Return on Investment.....	6
The Consequences of “Business as Usual” .....	6
Loss Avoidance.....	6
The Price of Ignoring Compassion .....	7
The Risks of Late Adoption .....	8
Becoming a Compassionate Organization .....	8
In General .....	8
The Compassionate Organizations Initiative .....	9
Certification .....	10
Resources .....	10

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## In Brief

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*“...it is for good reason the concept of organizational compassion, while still emerging, is touted as being the ‘next big thing’.”*

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Abusive “command and control” forms of management, the absence of a compassion competency within organizations, and the managerial cultures they create, risks devastating outcomes for corporations, educational institutions, healthcare systems, charitable institutions, governments, and other organizations. Abusive behaviors combined with indifference, or outright antagonism, toward employees, customers, vendors, shareholders, and others can result in devastating results for the offending organization.

Dr. Ben Farr-Wharton and Dr. Ace Simpson from the University of Technology Business School in Sydney, Australia, note that “when organizations allow employees to take time from their work to compassionately tend to, and care for, the suffering of colleagues, several positive individual and team-based outcomes ensue.”<sup>1</sup> They explain that the concept may at first seem wasteful and indulgent, yet their research shows an emerging trend where organizations are “replacing fixed, bureaucratic processes with more agile, human-centric ones.” Farr-Wharton and Simpson note it “is for good reason the concept of organizational compassion, while still emerging, is touted as being the ‘next big thing’.”

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## The Power of Applied Compassion

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*“Compassion is good for the bottom line, it’s great for your relationships, and it inspires lasting loyalty.”*

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Stanford University’s Emma Seppälä, PhD notes: “Compassion is good for the bottom line, it’s great for your relationships, and it inspires lasting loyalty. In addition, compassion significantly boosts your health.”<sup>2</sup> Companies like Aetna, Gap, Starbucks, and Walmart are moving toward treating their employees better — incorporating many of the elements of a compassionate organization.<sup>3</sup>

Compassion values and practices will be meaningful for any organization, from sole practitioners and artisans, to large multinational conglomerates. The principles are essential to effective human interaction and support honest, ethical, and productive organizational settings.

In an 81-year study, Harvard University researchers found that the key to happiness and mental acuity is healthy relationships.<sup>4</sup> With so many people spending 200 hours or more at work each week, compassion — a basic requirement for healthy relationships — is essential.

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## Organizations in General

Companies that adopt compassion-based policies and practices can achieve a continuing cycle of increased employee loyalty and retention, customer



satisfaction, and profitability. These organizations have a significant competitive advantage in recruiting new talent — especially when such talent is in short supply.

## Individual Practitioners and Small Organizations

Developing a compassionate organization competency is practical for individual practitioners and small organizations. Sole practitioners and small companies will benefit in terms of better relationships with customers, suppliers, partnering professionals and organizations, and the communities they serve. Embracing the value and practice of compassion can improve reputation, trust, and mutual success.

## Government Agencies

For government agencies, the results can include increased staff satisfaction and effectiveness, greater agency creativity and responsiveness, and heightened citizen trust and participation. In areas that are prone to controversy and conflict (e.g., policing, corrections, urban development and renewal, environment), credibility and trust are increased — key elements that foster positive results.

## Healthcare, Health Services

In healthcare, the application of compassion produces better patient care and outcomes, shorter length of stay, lowered costs, reduced healthcare provider and staff burnout, and greater trust by patients and their families.<sup>5</sup>

## High Human Contact Service Organizations

Service organizations that have continuing immediate and more intimate contact with consumers (e.g., airlines, hotels, restaurants, career coaches, counselors, transit coach operators, law firms) will find that a credible application of compassion-based policies and practices can increase their effectiveness and success.

# The Impact of Compassion Upon Organizations

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## Why Compassion!

Uvinie Lubecki at Leading Through Connection identifies some of the benefits of building an organizational compassion competency:<sup>6</sup>

1. Leadership resilience increases. Building leader resilience can reduce incidents of depression, moodiness, and mental illness. Compassionate leaders tend to be calmer and increasingly effectively in dealing with emotional distress when dealing with suffering. Stephen Trzeciak, MD, MPH and Anthony Mazzaelli, MD, JD, MBE, coauthors of *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring*

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*Some of the benefits of compassion include leadership resilience increases, team dynamic improvements, and increases in organizational performance and retention.*

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*Makes a Difference*, came to similar conclusions about the effect of compassion upon healthcare providers.<sup>7</sup>

2. Team dynamic improve. Research demonstrates that the practical application of compassion produces higher levels of trust and mutually beneficial interaction between team members. Lubecki points out that a survey of 1,000 business leaders in more than 800 organizations who others saw as compassionate had teams who scored higher on critical performance dynamics within their organizations.
3. Organizational performance and retention increases. Collaboration across teams, commitment to the organization, and loyalty increased. Research on employee tenure and loyalty suggests that, when leaders perceived to incorporate high levels of compassion, their teams are 15% more like to stay with the organization. For example, a company with 50 employees achieving that 15% improvement would see an additional \$400,000 in added annual profit.

Referencing the work of Christina Boedker,<sup>8</sup> Lubecki notes that when the compassion is incorporated as a leadership value and practice, it results in the following:

- Leaders spend more time and effort managing their people (29.3% higher).
- Managers have clear values and practice what they preach (25.7% higher).
- Senior people give employees opportunities to lead work assignments and activities (22.9% higher).
- Management encourages employee development and learning (21.1% higher).
- Leaders welcome criticism and feedback as learning opportunities (20.4% higher).
- Managers give increased recognition and acknowledgment to employees (19% higher)
- Leaders foster involvement and co-operation amongst employees (18% higher)
- Management communicates a clear vision and goals for the future (17.9% higher)
- Managers are innovative and encourage staff to think about problems in new ways (16.5% higher)

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*Early adoption of a compassion competency provides organizations with significant advantages.*

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### **The Advantage of Early Adoption**

Early adopters of compassion values and practices quickly define and develop their organization. The advantages they derive by adopting an organizational compassion initiative include:

1. The benefits mentioned earlier that result in greater effectiveness that, in turn, helps the organization achieve its goals (e.g., improved profits,



enhanced service to citizens, better learning outcomes, injury and disease prevention).

2. High visibility resulting from the emerging recognition of appreciation from dispirited, burned out, and cynical views about business, government, education, healthcare, and other sectors by workers, citizens, students, patients and families, and others.
3. Differentiation from organizations that have not developed a compassion competency. For skeptical observers (e.g., customers, shareholders, employees), the contrast between organizations that embody compassion and those that do not is often vivid.

## Return on Investment

The return on investment on establishing an organizational compassion competency falls into these general areas:

1. Cost savings through high productivity, reduced errors, greater creativity, more cooperation, less waste, reduced turnover, lowered absences, fewer health care costs (including the cost of sick days, medical leave of absence days, and illness on the job), fewer grievances, and customer and patient redress through lawsuits.
2. Improved responsiveness to opportunities and changes (including those in emerging markets, regulation, new practices and proficiencies) due to the safe, innovative, and success-oriented organizational ethic resulting from the development of compassion-based policies, practices, and skills.
3. Positive public awareness and support arising from unmet public demand for more ethical, responsive, and human-centric organizational behavior.

## The Consequences of “Business as Usual”

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*“Business as usual” can translate into significant problems for organizations.*

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### Loss Avoidance

The absence of a professional, disciplined, and effective application of organizational compassion can lead to loss. Depending upon the type of organization, its objectives, and other factors, loss can take many forms included but not limited to:

- Lowered productivity
- Reduced credibility
- Employee turnover increases
- Difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff
- Increased conflict and related claims
- More medical benefit costs
- Growing customer dissatisfaction
- Loss of credibility
- Increased lawsuits and fines
- Customer/client/patient dissatisfaction
- Deteriorating relationships with shareholders, vendors, and voters



- High workers compensation claims
- Additional paid sick days
- Increased absenteeism
- Burdensome legislation
- Public contempt (refer to the examples below)

## The Price of Ignoring Compassion

When some organizations (“early adopters”) integrate compassion as a fundamental value and practice, they present a stark contrast to entities that are personified by the old command and control approach to management; mistreat customers, employees, and the public; engage in social prejudices (e.g., race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity) and demeaning behavior; or that go after profits at any cost.

The following three examples are illustrative of how the absence of compassion can lead to destructive effects across a range of organizational types.

### Papa John’s Pizza

Papa John’s founder John Schnatter's comments about Col. Sander’s racism, including a racial slur, proved disastrous for Schnatter and the pizza company. Schnatter's lack of awareness and sensitivity led to founder Schnatter’s resignation for the company’s Board of Directors and the University of Louisville’s Board of Trustees, the University of Kentucky cutting ties to Schnatter, and — ultimately — a dramatic drop in sales.<sup>9</sup>

Forbes reported that Papa John’s culture was toxic. After Schnatter’s criticism of the National Football League’s handling of the national anthem protests, Papa John’s shares dropped 11% in hours. Reports indicate Schnatter’s behavior ranged from spying on his workers to sexually inappropriate conduct “which has resulted in at least two confidential settlements.” Schnatter was not alone. There were allegations that he and other Papa John’s executives engaged in “a laundry list of transgressions” — many directed at women.<sup>10</sup>

### Financial Industry Abuses

Sued and fined, key institutions within the financial industry<sup>11</sup> continue to work to establish credibility with government agencies and the public. They include prominent companies such as Bank of America,<sup>12,13</sup> Wells Fargo,<sup>14,15</sup> American Express,<sup>16</sup> JPMorgan,<sup>17</sup> Goldman Sachs,<sup>18</sup> HSBC,<sup>19</sup> Citigroup,<sup>20</sup> and Barclays.<sup>21</sup>

The predatory and exploitive behavior of these and other institutions led to billions of dollars in fines, significant erosion in public trust, and increased government intervention.<sup>22,23</sup> Additionally, their treatment of customers (particularly egregious in the case of Wells Fargo) and employees<sup>24</sup> caused substantial suffering.

For example, after Bank of America decided to implement a \$5 monthly debit card fee in Washington State, many customers became fed up, previously experiencing a poor relationship with the bank. A day after the announcement,

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*The decision by Bank of America to charge \$5 debit-card fees has peeved hordes of customers, prompting a wave of online tirades and a continued flight to local credit unions.*

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BECU — the largest credit union in the state — saw a surge in new members, breaking all previous records.<sup>25</sup>

### **Pennsylvania State University**

*The Los Angeles Times* reported that former Penn State University President Graham B. Spanier was charged with conspiring with top university officials to cover up the actions of football coach Jerry Sandusky, convicted of abusing young boys. The university's response to the suffering of the victims was appalling. Pennsylvania Attorney General Linda Kelly noted that the university "turned a blind eye" to the serial predatory abuse.<sup>26</sup>

The scandal adversely impacted Penn State's reputation, athletic programs, and finances. In addition to legal costs, the Associated Press reported that "Penn State's trustees have authorized some \$60 million to be used for settlements."<sup>27</sup>

### **Other Examples**

Other examples appear in government, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, international trade, nonprofit, and most other types of organizations.

## **The Risks of Late Adoption**

As compassion becomes more ingrained in organizations, late adopters of compassion policies and practices will face the twin challenges of losing customers, patients, votes, supporters, and investors while simultaneously needing to establish their compassion credentials. This dynamic is not new, having emerged in the move to adopt other essential, ethical, and life-centric capabilities in the customer service, environmental, equal opportunity, human rights, and other worldwide movements.

Failure to adopt compassion competencies and practices in a timely way can produce especially devastating outcomes in some organizational segments such as government, healthcare, hospitality, and human services. Their harmful traditional practices stand out in greater contrast when the presence of compassionate organizations is recognized.

## **Becoming a Compassionate Organization**

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### **In General**

Leading Through Connection notes that, "in a survey of over 1,000 leaders from 800 organizations, 91% said compassion is very important for their leadership and 80% said they would like to enhance their compassion but do not know how. Many leaders believe that it's hard to balance results with compassion. Yet, in interviews, when compassion was accurately defined, almost all leaders said it reflected what it looked like when they were leading at their best."<sup>28</sup>

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*"... in a survey of over 1,000 leaders from 800 organizations, 91% said compassion is very important for their leadership."*

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The skills needed to create organizational compassion competency include:

- Compassion (including empathy and emotional intelligence)
- Leadership
- Critical thinking
- Vision and motivation
- Power dynamics (Integrative Power Management Model)
- Conflict management (Integrative Conflict Management Model)
- Emotional intelligence
- Communication
- Relational
- Creating agreement
- Organizational citizenship

## The Compassionate Organizations Initiative

[The International Center for Compassionate Organizations](#) has developed a Compassionate Organizations Initiative that is designed to build critical organization-related interpersonal skills to improve a broad range of positive success outcomes. The initiative consists of two tracks:

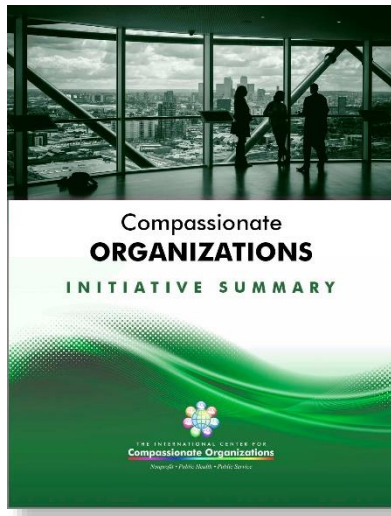
- Compassion-Trained Organizations (CTOs): organizations with a select group of employees who have completed any of the Compassionate Organization training programs.
- Accredited Compassionate Organizations (ACOs): organizations that have met the training, policy, and practice requirements for annual evaluation and accreditation as CCOs.

Both programs are evidence-based and designed for maximum effectiveness and minimum organizational demands in terms of financial, time, and other resource commitments. They incorporate a broad range of essentials including emotional intelligence, conflict management, early identification of relational problems (concerning employees, customers and clients, vendors, shareholders, social advocates, and others), preventive elements and rapid response to emerging problem areas.

These innovative programs draw upon extensive research. They employ online, on-demand multimedia training, support materials, and a rich body of online resources that are available 24/7.

Practical application of these programs can produce significant reductions in costs, claims against the organization, employee turnover, etc. Establishing these programs can have a direct, positive impact on sales, productivity, organizational objectives, public trust, and more.

Using a public health approach, the initiative uses a 60-point assessment as a starting point for implementing a cost-effective and long-term approach to





developing organizational compassion. The graphic on the following page illustrates the elements of this assessment.



## Certification

Certification of Compassion Trained Organizations (CTOs) consists of an annual online compassion assessment, adoption of a compassion policy, and the implementation of a Compassionate Trust Leader Program.

Certification of Accredited Compassionate Organizations incorporates the requirements for CTOs and adds adoption of compassion policies and practices, compassionate leadership training, and an annual accreditation review. There are qualification requirements including length of time of operation, meeting statutory requirements (human rights, health, environmental, etc.), ethical practices, absence of convictions or fines for illegal practices, and honest, ethical, and transparent operations.

Both programs incorporate online, on-demand, and self-paced educational programs as well as online video conferences and a rich body of resources. More information about these programs is available upon request.

## Resources

[The International Center provides many free resources](#) including:

- Videos, including “Compassion – An Introduction,” the acclaimed short video that explains compassion and the need for it. Used worldwide, the video is available in English, French, and Greek.
- Publications, including a collection of White Papers and program descriptions. These are also free to download and use. A list of books that may be of interest to those wanting to know more about compassionate organizations is also included.
- In Brief and Fact Sheets can also be downloaded and distributed.





Note that, while many of these resources are provided at no charge, there are limits to their use. Please review the Creative Commons licenses for each resource before using them.

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## Notes

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