



As crises mount, respond with compassionate leadership

BY WENDY E. BARON, ARTHUR L. COSTA, AND ROBERT J. GARMSTON

In August 2020, when schools were plagued with uncertainties about opening, we talked with Juan, a middle school principal. He was exhausted after a full day of meetings with teacher and parent groups. Although we had planned to talk about the school's intended professional development, we instead listened as he described his situation.

"You can't believe the stress I'm

experiencing," Juan said, collapsing into the swivel chair in his office. "Welcome to the house of equal opportunity in the land of stress. How to open school this fall is a nightmare. Teachers are anxious about keeping their students safe. At the same time, they are concerned for their own health and that of their families. I'm feeling tremendous empathy for parents, teachers, and kids."

Tears welled up in his eyes. "They

have two lousy choices: open classrooms to in-person learning and risk student and teacher health or have students stay home with all difficulties of distance learning. One dad who was trying to teach his kids last spring while managing the household and a job said it was like living in a popcorn machine. I'm worried that the quality of learning and relationships will suffer at home."

Taking a tissue from the box on his

Compassionate responsiveness may be the most powerful motivator known, as it gently encourages a deeper discovery of ourselves.

desk usually reserved for a disturbed teenager, a disillusioned teacher, or a perplexed parent, he wiped the moisture from his eyes. “And like a set of Russian nesting dolls, inside each one is another demand. How can I respond to the incredible complexity that is constantly changing shape?” Choking up, he cleared his throat. His overwhelming fatigue and compassion were evident.

These are unusual times. Old ways of doing things are gone, never to be regained. Compassion and adaptivity are the leading edges of today’s professional development for school leaders (Garmston & Wellman 2016). Our intention is to provide prospective and current leaders with understandings about responding compassionately.

WHY NOW?

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that schools are complex systems in which everything affects everything else and that more important than materials and schedules are energy, commitment, and community. New priorities emerge, with the mental and physical health of every student and educator being the most important.

Chaotic and volatile conditions require leaders who are committed to clarity, creating a positive, healthy climate with connected relationships with every student, teacher, and parent. A compassionate mindset is a prerequisite to productively addressing family crises and social issues such as

equity, racism, illness, and weather-related disasters.

THE MEANING OF COMPASSION

The Latin root for the word “compassion” is *pati*, which means “to suffer” and the prefix *com-* means “with.” Compassion, originating from *compati*, literally means “to suffer with.”

Compassion is a willingness and desire to be kind to others. It means being thoughtful and aware of what others’ lives and experiences are like. At its root, it describes a deeper sense of understanding — rather than seeing others as separate entities, seeing them as a part of yourself and relating to what they are experiencing at a much deeper level.

Compassion exists when you are confronted with another’s suffering and you feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion comes from the heart and offers kindness, empathy, generosity, and acceptance. Other leadership qualities like vision, decisiveness, and navigating multiple time horizons come from the head. Both are essential, especially now.

Above all, compassion opens us to the reality of suffering and aspires to its healing — a tangible expression of love.

COMPASSIONATE LEADERS

We consider the term “leader” as descriptive of actions and not limited to title.

Compassionate leaders influence

others through inspiring, encouraging, empowering, and embodying. Who has not recalled a time when they were listened to with warmth and caring? Such occasions were likely associated with personal growth, seeded by empathic exchanges with a person of respect. Compassionate responsiveness may be the most powerful motivator known, as it gently encourages a deeper discovery of ourselves.

Compassionate leadership is a mindset and set of behaviors that anyone and everyone can embody. Leadership behaviors, even when unnoticed and unspoken, affect the climate, character, and destinations of schools. They are catalysts to building strong communities with harmonious, clear values and beliefs. Their members listen deeply, think critically and creatively, and are open to growing and learning — inescapable requirements for addressing concurrent global and local crises.

CREATING A CULTURE OF COMPASSION

Humans spend enormous energy managing the impression others have of them. In cultures of compassion, they can let go of that, reveal vulnerabilities, and bring their most authentic selves to one another and students (Edmonson, 2019).

In compassionate cultures, members expose their confusion, doubts, worries, and failings as much as their convictions, successes, and joys. Leaders

might be heard saying “I’m not sure what to do now” or “I don’t know how to ...” and even “forgive me, I made a mistake,” confident that acceptance and nonjudgment are cultural norms.

As leaders openly examine their own biases, feelings about others, predispositions, beliefs, mindsets, and past experiences, they open the door for other group members to examine their own biases and judgments. This openness and acceptance of one’s understory paves the way for more difficult conversations about such issues as equity, racism, environmental destruction, and social justice.

As a result of creating a culture where adults and students can speak up, the group may marshal the resources and build coalitions that enable lasting change for the greater good.

Compassionate leaders seek inclusiveness and work to create cultures of belonging. They express and affirm feelings and support the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of the group with self-care and stress management strategies. Small yet thoughtful actions such as saying thank you, helping one another, remembering birthdays, and expressing gratitude are evidence of a compassionate culture. Belonging words such as “we, our, us” are heard often instead of “me, mine, my.”

Leaders roll up their sleeves, volunteering to work with others, and foster collaboration by listening deeply, sharing responsibilities, and making space for others to lead. Knowing how to listen to and explore ideas as well as make decisions with engagement from all stakeholders, compassionate leaders embody responsiveness to the diverse needs of the group. They create a culture characterized by caring, respectful relationships among adults and with students in which a sense of belonging and attention to equity and social justice is evident.

Most importantly, in compassionate cultures, leaders listen to understand, they suspend judgment, and respond with curiosity — inviting



others to think, reflect, learn, research, create, innovate, share different points of view, and gain insights from one another.

In cultures of compassion, leaders encourage others to express their ideas fully, empathize with expressions of emotion, and show a willingness to let others influence and change them.

COMPASSIONATE RESPONSIVENESS

Over time, we explore and deepen our understanding of compassionate responsiveness and become more attuned to situations in which compassion is essential. We become more skillful, strategic, and critically self-reflective of our own behaviors and work to continuously improve, realizing that learning to use compassionate responsiveness is always a work in progress (Costa & Kallick, 2020).

The journey of compassionate leadership can be understood as a series of progressive steps that include the following. (See diagram above.)

Awareness

Through reading, learning, and

interacting with others, we deepen our understanding of compassion. We expand our language of compassion: empathy, forgiveness, consideration, and kindheartedness. We distinguish from what it is not: indifference, contempt, disrespect, insensitivity.

We recognize emotions in others and connect them to our own feeling experiences. We celebrate the achievements and successes with others who are celebrating, mourn with those who are mourning, and cry with those who are crying. We reflect on times when we have felt these emotions and had others respond to us with compassion. We remember when we wished for compassion from others.

Labeling emotions, understanding the underlying causes for those emotions, and recognizing behaviors related to those emotions means we are developing awareness of self and others. We are becoming more observant — the first step toward being able to regulate our emotions and choose our actions.

Expanding capacities

Noticing is key. Observing our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors

as well as those of others enables us to make wiser, more compassionate decisions in the moment. For example, when in a brainstorming meeting, we may want to assert our own ideas and judge others' ideas. Consumed with our own thinking, we fail to predict that those actions will irritate others or even stop their participation.

When we pause to observe what we are thinking and feeling before acting, we quickly realize we should listen with curiosity and empathize with others rather than judge their ideas. We put our ideas out on the table gently, respectfully, with an invitation for others to consider.

As we learn and practice compassionate responsiveness, we become more skillful, with a larger repertoire of strategies. We begin to notice our own "self-talk" and become increasingly able to replace negative and critical self-talk with more positive, optimistic, and loving thoughts.

As we expand personal capacities, we are more able to call on and employ different responses more effectively. We learn when and how to listen deeply, to identify emotions by observing body language, facial expressions, eye movements, tears, posture, and intonations.

As we cultivate the emotional skills of noticing, reflecting, and regulating, we also grow in our understanding of perspectives. We look beyond a particular situation to appreciate the conditions, injustices, oppression, inequities, and feelings of powerlessness that may be producing certain emotions and actions. We replace the energy of despair with the exuberance of hope and offer a response of compassion.

Increasing alertness and recognizing opportunities

Increasingly, we become more sensitive to cues from others and the environment, recognizing when a challenging situation may be causing an emotional reaction. Initially, we may find it easy to engage in compassion in familiar, often simple contexts.

Over time, we become more alert to opportunities in new and complex situations.

The act of paying repeated, purposeful, and focused attention creates chemical and physical changes in the brain which, in turn, shapes our personal identity. As we become more alert, we respond compassionately more consistently and intuitively in ever more complex social situations. We learn that responding to one emotion may activate the expression of others, and we remain present and attentive when this occurs. Denial may be expressed with anger, rejection may produce feelings of fear, and brooding may be a product of grief.

As a result, we become better able to predict situations that may surface more intense emotions and are more skillful in facilitating an exchange of diverse perspectives, revealing underlying beliefs and experiences, and encouraging others to listen, empathize, and join together in responsive, compassionate actions.

Extending values

As we reflect on our own and others' experiences, we recognize that responding compassionately leads to better relationships and builds community. We observe that others are more able and likely to reveal and describe their feelings. We notice a better sense of self-confidence and optimism when facing difficult situations.

Recognizing the value of compassionate response strategies, we make a commitment to using them even more widely. Compassionate responsiveness is important not only in particular situations, but also more transcendentally as a pattern of behavior in our lives — to disadvantaged, disempowered populations, to other living creatures, and to the environment.

Building commitment

As we recognize the effects of compassionate behaviors, we become

advocates for their use. For example, during a meeting to address a complex issue, a leader may begin by surfacing feelings about that problem. When in a difficult conversation, we may suggest that we each listen to one another with empathy and respect. We commit to compassionate responsiveness in our own behaviors as well as promoting the same in others.

Compassionate responsiveness grows as we become more alert to opportunities to respond with compassion and extend our values to feel the suffering of others. We set goals for improvement, monitor our progress, and make adjustments along the way. Through our demonstrable commitment, we improve our relationships with others, build a culture of compassion in our communities, and become increasingly effective as leaders.

Internalization

Compassionate responsiveness can never be fully mastered. However, it can mature into more than just sets of learned behaviors and become more like a mindset. When we internalize compassionate responsiveness, we require no prompting. Instead, we demonstrate and urge others to enrich their environments with acts of caring, concern, and tenderness.

It becomes an internal compass to guide our actions, decisions, and thoughts. When confronted with complex decisions, we ask ourselves, "What is the most compassionate action I can take right now? What strategies do I have at my disposal that could benefit others? Who else do I need to think about? What intrigues me about this situation, and how might I learn from it? How might I use this opportunity to reaffirm my pledge for justice, dignity, hope, and love?"

Compassionate responsiveness is contagious. If leaders, teachers, and parents were to embrace, internalize, and teach these responsive practices, the world might experience the spread of

Continued on p. 33

WHAT CAN DISTRICT LEADERS DO?

These three capacities are not innate. They can be cultivated with support. District leaders' support can nurture and help sustain school leaders' roles as learners, partners, and visionaries. In turn, district leaders benefit from support that helps them value and cultivate those leadership skills.

Here are three ways district leaders can support these capacities in their school leaders.

Experience: Give leaders the opportunity to experience these capacities themselves. Identify district leaders who can provide school leaders with models of each of the capacities. Think broadly and involve multiple leaders. For example, the chief academic officer might model the partner capacity by inviting principals to co-design their own professional learning; the director of curriculum and instruction might model the learner capacity by bringing an authentic dilemma to a group of principals and ask for their thought partnership to move forward.

When you provide an experience, make sure to also provide a moment of meaning-making for principals to reflect on the experience and connect it back to their own leadership. Allowing school leaders to experience what it's like to have their leader exhibit these dispositions is a powerful first step in

building their own capacity.

Practice: Give leaders the opportunity to plan how they will practice leading with these dispositions in mind.

We use a framework that describes elements of each capacity as an anchor as we support leaders to grow in these capacities. We ask them to focus on one capacity and plan how they will incorporate that capacity into their next leadership moves.

Will they bring back the school vision and goals at the next staff meeting and invite teachers' perspectives on progress (visionary)? Will they focus on seeking multiple perspectives and listening to teachers before making decisions (partner)? Will they look for the kind of data that will help them understand their learners' experience and bring that to the decision-making table (learner)?

Providing leaders time to be intentional about developing these leader dispositions is essential.

Reflect: Give leaders the opportunity to reflect on the impact of their changes in practice. Just like teachers need time to reflect on the impact of their instructional decisions, so do leaders.

After leaders have decided what capacity they are focusing on and made a plan for moving forward with that capacity in mind, give leaders

the chance to reflect on how their leadership moves impacted teachers and students. Ask them how they know whether they have succeeded in growing as a partner, visionary, and learner.

Invite leaders to bring data to their own leader collaboration meetings (e.g. notes from leadership team meetings, classroom observations, instructional coaching discussions, etc.). Provide them with time to discuss their data with colleagues, with guiding questions such as: Are you seeing what you were hoping to see? What leadership move do you want to make next to support teacher/student learning? How will you know if it works?

Providing leaders time to reflect on their own leadership moves is a crucial element of developing leader capacity.

Even before the pandemic, leaders experienced stressful times and there will continue to be stressful times ahead. Our learner-partner-visionary framework offers leaders a clear and simple anchor to lean on in any crisis. This framework allows leaders to prioritize what matters most and galvanize their staff as they identify a path forward together.

•
Jennifer Ahn (jeahn@mills.edu) is director of network partnerships and Elizabeth Shafer (eshaffer@mills.edu) is director of strategy of influence at Lead by Learning. ■

As crises mount, respond with compassionate leadership

Continued from p. 29
yet another highly infectious pandemic — a pandemic of compassion.

REFERENCES

Costa, A. & Kallick, B. (2020). *Leading learning organizations with habits of mind.* Institute for Habits of Mind.

Edmondson, A. (2019). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation,*

and growth. Wiley.

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (2016). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

•
Wendy E. Baron (wendy.e.baron@gmail.com) is co-founder and an emeritus chief officer, social and emotional learning (SEL) at New Teacher Center and an SEL consultant. Arthur L.

Costa (artcosta@aol.com) is an emeritus professor at California State University, Sacramento and co-director of the Institute for Habits of Mind. Robert J. Garmston (fabobg@gmail.com) is an emeritus professor of education administration at California State University, Sacramento, and co-developer of Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools. ■