

How to Coach for Compassion

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Compassion is a better managerial approach than toughness in today's workplace, writes a Stanford psychologist in a new article.

In fact, trying to make employees fearful and punish them for mistakes is typically counterproductive to the organization, says Emma Seppala, associate director of Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. "The more compassionate response will get you more powerful results," she wrote in a Harvard Business Review article.

Some of the interpersonal skills that are observed when individuals display compassion are genuine care, empathy and sympathy, lending an open ear.

Compassion is essential to working with coaching clients as having a successful and effective coaching relationship requires a degree of compassion and care for clients. Clients must also develop and have a healthy sense of compassion in order to have fruitful interpersonal connections with others. There are a series of experiences and circumstances that can challenge the ability to display compassion. However, if coaches or clients do not learn to have an aptitude for displaying compassion, there can be a negative consequence of being seen as cold or impersonal and lead to the loss of relationships. On the other hand, an individual who displays a high regard for compassion enhances their relationships in both personal and professional settings.

THE FOLLOWING BEHAVIORS ARE MANIFESTED IN CLIENTS WHO ARE UNSKILLED IN DISPLAYING COMPASSION:

- Appear to others as less caring or empathic than most other people
- Usually doesn't show interest in others by asking personal questions
- Usually doesn't respond much when others try to get more personal in their communication

- Overly focused on results at the expense of connection
- Believes in separation of personal life and business
- May consider talk of a personal nature an inappropriate topic at work
- Uncomfortable with people in stress
- May not think of or does not thinking of showing compassion when someone is in pain
- May have less sympathy than most for the problems another person is having

ON THE CONTRARY, CLIENTS WHO DISPLAY A HIGH DEGREE OF COMPASSIONATE SKILL:

- Other people would say they genuinely care about people
- Interested in other people's work and non-work problems
- Helps other people
- Is sympathetic to other people who are less fortunate
- Shows an empathetic response to others

JUST AS IMPORTANT, COMPASSION CAN BE OVERUSED. EXAMPLES OF OVERUSED SKILL ARE:

- Does not hold employees accountable
- Other employees may feel that the manager is being manipulate
- May smooth over conflict in the interest of harmony
- May not be tough enough in negotiations or may not protect his or her team
- May feel other peoples' issues so much that objectivity is affected and they are able to get away with too much

There can be several reasons why a client is not displaying a high affinity for compassion. A few potential



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explanations are a clients' fear of not being able to handle disagreements, have trouble dealing with emotionally or politically charged issues, see compassion as weakness, and trouble dealing with people who are different. For physicians especially, with current burnout rates for physicians at over 50%, the state of exhaustion may lead them to be short or insensitive with other people. Fortunately, as a coach, there are strategies that can be employed to assist our clients in utilizing compassion.

STRATEGIES FOR COACHING COMPASSION:

- Ask your client to explain what are multiple ways to respond to a situation with another person, from displaying no compassion to displaying the idea amount of compassion for the situation
- Gently help your client increase his or her personal comfort with displays of emotion by coaching your client to imagine how he or she would feel in a situation that has been brought to them, and to respond with that.
- Stress the importance of listening, not giving advice unless asked, and letting someone know you have heard and acknowledged them as a way to show people they care.
- Have your client list the three highly compassionate people he or she knows of (perhaps one at work, one off work, and one notable figure) and examine the behaviors of these individuals
- Help your client to assess whether he or she possesses biases or prejudices against a particular group of people that would make it difficult to display compassion to that group
- Practice mindfulness: If you are upset, wait until your feelings diminish so that you can approach your employee from a calmer place. Practicing breathing exercises can help boost your ability to regulate your emotions and then appear more concerned and compassionate if the situation calls for it.
- Learn to empathize: try to understand the situation from your employee's view. Understand your employee's perspective – perhaps they are nervous, or have family problems that are affecting them, or are feeling overwhelmed. You are less likely to want to take a harsh approach to your employee when you understand the reasons for their behavior.
- Forgiveness: research shows that the ability to forgive not only helps your employee, it significantly boosts your own health and psychological well-being as well.

A display of compassion, regardless of the context, creates an environment where interpersonal relationships can be cultivated. In a coaching relationship, a display of compassion can increase the comfort level of a client approaching and sharing emotionally-invested experiences, which can lead to a more positive and effective coaching relationship. Compassion is complex – some people act too compassionately and some act too harsh – coaching can help them fine-tune their display of compassion to get better results in their work life and in their personal life.

For additional information see: *FYI: For Your Improvement* by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger; and Clifton B. Parker. Stanford News, May 21, 2015, Compassion is a wise and effective managerial strategy.



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