

Principals, It's Time to Move Beyond Empathy and Lead with Compassion

By Dr. Zac Bauermaster



One spring afternoon, I rode my bike around town with my three kids. We were having a great time, smiling and laughing as we cruised the streets. It was a beautiful day, and even though the kids were still relatively young, they could ride their own bikes. As we were riding, we came to a long,

gradual hill. I decided the best thing I could do was set an example for them and go out in front as the leader.

I went ahead of my three kids, showing them the way to the top of the hill. I began to peddle faster to help propel me toward the top. My legs were burning, but I kept going without looking back. I reached the top of the hill and rested under a stop sign while waiting for my kids to arrive any second. Unfortunately, as I looked back, I saw and heard a few things I was not expecting. Two of my children were halfway up the hill, standing beside their bikes. I heard my oldest daughter yell, "Dad, we can't do it!" My youngest was about a quarter of the way up the hill, crying and yelling for me to come back down. "Daddy, come back!" I listened, but instead of going down the hill to meet them, I stayed at the top and waited for them to arrive as they walked their bikes.

Fast forward to a few weeks later, and we were out for a bike ride again, enjoying our time together until we got near the hill. My oldest two started to say, "Let's find another way to go; we don't want to go to the hill. We can't do it." As we continued riding, I prepped them verbally. I said, "You can make it up the hill; I know you can!" I also added a little advice: "While we are approaching the hill, start to pedal faster so you can gain momentum to help you the whole way up the hill."

Off we went up the hill. Once again, I sped off toward the top of the hill to set the example. As I reached the top of the hill and stood under the stop sign, I turned around with no kids nearby. There they stood again off their bikes, a couple of kids crying, one even saying, "This isn't fun anymore. Let's just go home." We finished our bike ride that day with not everyone in the greatest of moods.

I began reflecting. I wanted the kids to get to the top of the hill. It wasn't about me getting to the top of the hill, but about my kids getting to the top. I recognized that their moods had changed drastically over the past two bike rides. They were either crying or sharing their displeasure with the hill and how I was leading or failing to lead them, to be more exact, up the hill.

The following weekend, the kids and I headed out on our bikes. I was excited to face the hill when my middle daughter suggested, "Let's go a different way; I don't want to go to the hill." I listened, but no matter what, we were going to the hill

that day. As we approached the hill, I spoke individually to all three. I rode my bike behind my oldest daughter and said, "You go ahead. You can do this; I will be right behind you." I pedaled my bike beside my two younger children and said, "You can do this. I'm going to be pedaling right here beside you."

As our legs burned, we moved closer and closer to the top of the hill. My oldest daughter smiled at the top of the hill as she exclaimed, "I made it!" I arrived at the top of the hill with the other two a few seconds later. That day, we stood at the top of the hill for a few extra seconds, fist-bumping and high-fiving one another to celebrate everyone reaching the top. A few days later, we headed out for another bike ride. Guess what they said this time? "Daddy, let's go to the hill!" I asked my daughter, "What helped you get to the top of the hill last time we rode?" Her response was, "Because we knew you were right there with us." Wow, those nine words from my daughter hit me hard. "Because we knew you were right there with us."

Lesson Learned

The most effective leaders understand their followers' needs. I had been attempting to lead by example, expecting my children to follow and ride up the hill. However, all my children needed was for me to notice their needs and act compassionately by meeting them where they were. How often do we, as leaders, get out in front of those we lead and incorrectly assume they are right there with us, and we are with them? It wasn't about me reaching the top of the hill but moving my three kids to the top. Leadership is not about the leader being out in front, reaching the "top" before anyone else. Leadership is about coming alongside the people we lead, observing their needs, meeting them where they are, and helping them reach their full potential—often at heights they didn't think they could reach.

Benefits of Compassionate Leadership

Principals, it's time to move beyond empathy and lead with compassion. The word compassion is derived from the Latin roots "com," meaning "with, together," and "pati," meaning "to suffer." So, at its core, compassion can be understood as "to suffer with." Compassion is a critical component of effective leadership. According to the Harvard Business Review, neuroimaging research has shown that leaders who display compassion receive more positive responses from people's brains. Establishing a compassionate culture has been associated with reduced emotional exhaustion among employees (a key factor in burnout) and decreased employee absenteeism from work (Trzeciak, Marrarelli, & Seppala, 2023).

Research findings also indicate that when leaders prioritize the welfare of their employees, it significantly influences various aspects of the work environment. This focus serves as a reliable predictor of factors such as employee job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, loyalty and trust in the organization, ultimately leading to higher retention rates (Van Dierendonck, 2010). Additionally, this approach is associated with enhanced employee job performance by increasing motivation and has demonstrated positive effects on overall team performance (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). Author and speaker Simon Sinek (2014) said, "Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge."

Take Action: The Three L's to Leading with Compassion

1. **Look Up, Slow Down and Look Around** - We cannot effectively lead others with compassion if we are operating at a hurried pace and not taking the time to slow down and use our eyes to look for the needs of others. A Johns Hopkins study found that giving someone just 40 seconds of compassion can lower their anxiety in a measurable way (Trzeciak & Mazzarelli, 2019). When we make the effort to show individuals that we are happy to give them the time they need and deserve, we can enhance compassion. Leaders can be so "busy" that they often forget to pause and slow down. In a world, society and profession that are moving faster and faster, we must consider the needs of others by slowing down, *looking* up and *looking* around. Next time you are walking quickly through the hallway from one place to another, purposefully slow down and look around. Someone needs you. Be an unhurried leader.
2. **Listen More: Speak Less and Ask Questions** - Leading with compassion means *listening* more, asking questions and speaking less. We can learn so much about people when we close our mouths and open our ears. Questions are one of the most effective ways to connect with others. Listening allows leaders to not only hear the words that are spoken but also understand why the words are being spoken. Listening begins with asking the right questions. When a staff member is struggling, ask *how* you can support them instead of asking yes-or-no questions. Instead of asking *if* there is anything you can do to help, ask *how* you can help. I worked with a principal who often asked staff members the following questions: What do you need? How can I help? Most importantly, he listened, cared and took action. We want to invite staff members to share *how* we can help and support them, and when the right questions are asked in the right way, it will often give us something actionable. Leaders often

think we need to have the right answers when we should focus on asking the right questions, *listening* and learning.

3. **Learn to Discern the Needs of Others** - Looking and listening allow leaders to build social awareness to diagnose and *learn* the needs of others and action steps to follow. Taylor (2022) states that we will *learn* to appreciate the emotions of others as a form of data helping us diagnose where people are, what they need and what they don't. Too often, leaders move into action before taking the time to diagnose the needs around them. Leading with compassion requires adaptive leadership adapting to the moment by looking and listening to *learn* to discern the needs of others.

Summary

To put it simply, compassion is empathy in action. The actions we take have a far more significant impact than the words we speak. *People need to know we are right there with them.* That's compassion; that's leadership. Leading with compassion means individuals know we see them; we see their needs and we care. It is making a difference one staff member at a time. Leadership isn't for show; it's compassionately walking humbly and quietly alongside others through life's "little" moments.

People want to know their leader is by their side, caring about them as a *person*. As leaders, we shouldn't stop at empathy, sharing the feelings of others, but allow empathy to move us toward compassion. Empathizing should drive us to observe the needs of others and respond accordingly. Compassion is not simply empathizing with what someone is feeling or going through; compassion is recognizing suffering and moving beyond empathy with a willingness to help.

Make the time to be a student of all the people around you, prioritize them, genuinely get to know them, empathize, observe their needs and move into action with compassion.

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