



## Developing Compassionate Academic Leadership: The Practice of Kindness

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### ABSTRACT

This opinion piece paper argues that there is now a compelling need for compassionate academic leadership in our universities in both a national and international context. The premise of the paper is that universities are, or ought to be, 'caregiving organisations', because of their role and primary task of helping students to learn. However, the relentless neoliberal instrumentalisation and marketisation of higher education has eroded that premise. Yet universities still have a duty of care; a moral and legal obligation to ensure that everyone associated with the institution, whether this be students, employees or the general public, are fully protected from any personal physical and/or emotional harm. Care, kindness and compassion are not separate from being professional; rather, they represent the fundamentals of humanity in the workplace. Compassion is now a crucial and core concern in tertiary education. Arguably, in the future, universities that can demonstrate their compassionate credentials and pedagogy will be the successful universities, and this requires kindness in leadership and compassionate institutional cultures. Therefore, I argue that in order to nurture cultures of compassion, universities require their leaders – as the carriers of culture – to embody compassion in their leadership practice. However, this needs to be a shared approach, rather than a dominant, hierarchical top-down approach, and is characterised by openness, curiosity, kindness, authenticity, appreciation and above all compassion. The paper draws upon contemporary thinking and research around the role of kindness in leadership and the development of compassionate organisational values and cultures

**Keywords:** Values, culture, kindness, compassion, leadership

### Kindness, compassion and academic leadership

The premise of this opinion piece is that universities are, or ought to be, 'caregiving organisations' that promote the practice of compassionate pedagogy, because of their role and primary task of helping students to learn:

*The primary task of a caregiving organization is, ideally, the meeting of the needs of those who seek its services such as students ... When members and leaders hold fast to that task, in the way that sailors hold fast to the topmast in the midst of roiling seas, they create the possibility for conversations, interpretations, conflicts and mutual engagements that are in [the students'] best interest. (Kahn, 2005, p. 231)*

Universities and their leaders have a duty of care – a moral and legal obligation to ensure that everyone associated with the institution whether this be students, employees or the general public, are fully protected from personal physical and/or emotional harm. However, Watson's (2009) exploration of morale in UK universities found that while 'at their best they can achieve remarkable things; at their worst they can be petty, corrosive, even dangerous' (p. 141, emphasis added). Bergquist and Pawlack (2008) observe that dominant higher education cultures have been described metaphorically as a world of the blade, with a strong emphasis on often subtle, but powerful, competition and striving for prestige and dominance. Cultures such as these stifle the conditions in which compassionate pedagogy can survive and flourish. Critical studies of university contexts (e.g. Smyth, 2017; Waddington, 2016; 2017) also reveal troubling compassion gaps. Gaps that have been attributed to neoliberal ideology, and the marketisation and commodification of higher education globally. For example, Smyth (pp. 93-94, citing Carrasco & Fromm 2016, emphasis added) notes:

*When educational institutions are allowed to become subsumed by market pressures, this has a corrupting effect on academic and educational leadership [leaders] become troubled educational practitioners, ethically pliant, driven by a market-oriented mindset, and generally pushed to focus on issues other than pedagogy or collegiality.*

Neoliberal ideology and higher education policy models that emphasise the value of free market competition are seemingly at odds with the values and practice of compassionate pedagogy. The premise and principle of the university as a caregiving organisation appears to have been lost. However, times are changing.

We are now beginning to witness what might be described as the 'compassion turn', which recognises the crucial role of compassion as a core concern in education, health and social care, and globally to ensure the future sustainability of humankind and the planet (e.g. Ballatt & Campling, 2011; Coles, 2015; Gibbs, 2017; Gilbert, 2017). Compassion is not the



same as empathy, sympathy, pity or altruism, although these are related concepts. For the purpose of this opinion paper compassion is defined as attentiveness and noticing another's need, and a willingness to alleviate the suffering of others in order to enhance their wellbeing (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Nevertheless, Thomas and Rowland (2014, p.108, emphasis added) argue that while compassion is viewed as an important leadership characteristic, little work has been done to judge 'the impact of its application or the consequences of not being able to demonstrate *kindness*'. As an adjective, *kind* means being sympathetic and helpful, and *kindness* indicates the quality or state of being kind, and is something which challenges us to be self-aware (Ballatt & Campling, 2011). Importantly, Murray and Gill's (2018) exploration of kindness in the UK public and private sectors suggest that kindness is an easily understood concept, in contrast to compassion, care and empathy, which were found to be more ambiguous terms. They conclude that 'leaders of 21<sup>st</sup> century workplaces will benefit from focusing on developing kind leaders and kind organisations' (p. 63). So what does this mean for universities?

In order to create organisational cultures that nurture compassionate pedagogy and kindness, universities require their leaders – as the carriers of culture – to embody compassion in their leadership practice. This needs to be a shared approach, rather than a dominant, hierarchical top-down approach, characterised by openness, curiosity, kindness, authenticity, appreciation and above all compassion. Strategies for developing compassionate higher education leadership will require a paradigm shift from the prevalent toxic and dehumanising neoliberal ideology. de Zulueta's (2016) integrative review of compassionate leadership in healthcare suggests that this can be achieved through the abandonment of individualistic, heroic models of leadership, and adoption of shared, distributive and adaptive leadership. This involves leadership development throughout the organisation as a whole, and creation of collective, holistic learning strategies and cultures. Culture encompasses the shared values, assumptions and beliefs within organisations, occupational groups and disciplines (Mathieson, 2012; Schein, 2017). Whilst acknowledging Mathieson's argument that disciplines should be considered in terms of epistemological differences and socially situated practices, organisational leadership and culture can be considered as interdependent and synergistic (de Zulueta, 2016). Their co-development in a context of compassion and kindness requires acknowledgement of the challenges and difficulties of working in anxiety inducing environments (Ballatt & Campling, 2011). This entails sustaining high levels of trust, mutually supportive interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for reflection and action.

I contend that care, kindness and compassion are not separate from being professional; rather, they represent the fundamentals of humanity in the workplace. Arguably, in the future, universities that are able to demonstrate their compassionate credentials and pedagogy will be the successful universities. This requires reclamation of the principle of universities as caregiving organisations, and involves stepping back and slowing down (Berg & Seeber, 2016). This will provide space for the 'metaphorical removal of the cataracts by which people have been blinded' (Smyth, 2017, p. 216) in order to create dialogue and engagement. I conclude with two leadership questions posed by Johri (2018), who offers a global perspective on kindness in leadership. Firstly, ask yourself as a leader whether you believe that there is a strategic advantage in an approach based on kindness and inclusive communication? Secondly, can you describe one or two specific situations where you demonstrated these characteristics of kindness in your role as a leader?

### Biography

*Kathryn Waddington* is Reader in Psychology and Course Leader for the MSc Business Psychology at the University of Westminster. She began her professional life in nursing and healthcare, and has held academic head of department roles at two universities. Her research interests include organisational communication, gossip, and emotion in the workplace.

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Developing Compassionate Academic Leadership: The Practice of Kindness

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