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**Understanding and Creating Compassionate Institutional
Cultures and Practices
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This is an author's accepted manuscript of a chapter published in Gibbs, P., Jameson, J. and Elwick, A. (eds.) Values of the University in a Time of Uncertainty Cham, Switzerland, Springer, pp. 241-260.

The final authenticated publication is available at Springer via:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15970-2>

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Chapter Title: Understanding and creating compassionate institutional cultures and practices

Organizational culture is an important contributor to the development of compassion
(Worline and Dutton, 2017: 118)

Introduction

This chapter identifies and explores the values and assumptions underpinning compassionate institutional cultures and practices. It presents, and further develops, a conceptual framework for creating conditions for compassion outlined in Waddington (2017). Theoretically, the chapter is informed by insights and evidence from psychodynamic psychology, work and organizational psychology. It also draws lightly upon empirical material and findings from a small-scale mixed methods study exploring Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies and academic engagement in six universities in the UK (reported in Lister and Waddington, 2014; Waddington and Lister, 2010; Waddington, 2012; Waddington and Lister, 2013). A key finding from this study was that HRM strategies and practices were often viewed in a negative light, described in language that implied a sense of conflict:

A HoD [Head of Department] referred to perceptions of HR in the following terms: *'HR is essentially used to implement unpleasantness'*. They went on to talk about senior management *'taking HR out of the drawer'* when there was something unpleasant to implement, then putting it away afterwards. This reflected an underlying perception and sense of HR as a *'tool in the management armoury'*. (Waddington and Lister, 2013: 20)

An armoury is a place where weapons are kept, implying battles, conflict, casualties and trauma. Conflict is therefore used as an organizing metaphor in the chapter, to illustrate the tensions and potential for suffering in a higher education landscape dominated by neoliberal ideology and values (e.g. Berg and Seeber, 2016; Calvard and Sang 2017;

Smyth 2017). Culture is an organizational concept that exemplifies how work gets done, how individuals are rewarded, developed, managed and led. Culture includes an organization's values, its power dynamics, decision-making processes, allocation of resources, behavioural expectations and the level of risk it accepts and encourages (Hogan and Coote, 2014; Schein, 2017). A key assumption underpinning this chapter is that compassion is a core component of healthy and humane workplace cultures.

Universities have a duty of care – a moral and a legal obligation to ensure that everyone associated with the organization, whether employee, student or the general public, is fully protected from any personal physical and/or emotional harm. Care and compassion are not separate from being professional; rather, they represent fundamentals of humanity in the workplace. Being human 'implies a particular moral status: having moral value, agency, and responsibility' (Bastion et al., 2011: 469). Being human refers to essential characteristics such as openness, emotionality, vitality, and warmth. Barnard and Curry (2011) assert that humanity is fostered through self-compassion, which entails: (i) being kind and understanding toward oneself in times of pain or failure; (ii) acknowledging one's own suffering as part of a larger human experience; and (iii) holding painful feelings and thoughts in mindful awareness. Universities should care about compassion and it is vitally important that their institutional cultures reflect these central aspects of humanity.

The chapter includes activities that encourage readers to question and critically reflect on the organizational dynamics, issues and challenges they have experienced and/or are facing in their work, signposted as *Slowdown and Think*. This term is deliberately chosen in order to disrupt the relentless pressures and demands of university life, in support of the concept of 'slow science'. Slow science is based on a feminist ethics of care that challenges such working conditions, arguing instead for strategies that 'foreground collaborative, collective, communal ways forward' (Mountz et al., 2015: 1237). *Slowdown and Think* activities are also included in response to Berg and Seeber's (2016: xiii) call for us all 'to think harder about what is really valuable in teaching, scholarship and collegiality'.

Slowdown and Think #1

- What inspired you to buy/read this book? What are you hoping to achieve after reading this chapter?

The chapter begins with an elaboration of a conceptual framework for creating the conditions for compassion and consideration of the need for compassionate values and practices in the academy. Schein's (2017) definition and model of organizational culture provides a core theoretical lens. The chapter concludes outlining a new paradigm for creating and sustaining compassionate cultures, which includes critical reflection, action learning and coaching.

Creating Conditions for Compassion

In Waddington (2017) a framework for creating compassionate institutional cultures and practices was presented, as summarized in Box 1.

Box 1: Conditions for Compassion

1. Being open-minded and self aware
2. Having an understanding of the science of mindful compassion
3. Exposing and illuminating the dark side of university life
4. Applying theoretical insights, ideas, concepts and frameworks from psychodynamic psychology
5. A commitment to working together to shift cultural patterns and behaviours at individual, group and organisational levels

Source: Waddington (2017: 67)

The approach outlined in Box 1 acknowledges the relevance of mindfulness and mindful compassion at the individual and neuroscience levels of analysis, but *extends* this to embrace a whole systems approach to achieving cultural change. It draws on insights and concepts from psychodynamic psychology, such as unconscious processes that can thwart

the most well intentioned organizational cultural change initiatives and interventions. From a psychodynamic standpoint, systems theory is based on the open systems approach and perspectives developed by family therapists (see Huffington et al., 2004; Waddington, 2017). Systemic ideas and thinking locate the institution in context, enabling a greater understanding of the interplay between the parts that constitute the whole, and also between the institution and the external environment (Zagier Roberts, 1994). Systems theory also relates to teamwork, and the way that teams work in both coordinated and co-operative ways, and/or in dysfunctional and fragmented ways (Ballatt and Campling, 2011).

A whole systems approach is necessary for effective organizational change (Holman et al., 2007). However according to Bushe (2017), it has been estimated that an overwhelming 75% of organizational development (OD) interventions – including culture change programmes and initiatives – fail. Based on this uninspiring failure rate, Bushe proposes three criteria that can be used as a checklist to interrogate OD and cultural change interventions in order to foster more collaborative work systems:

Criterion 1: The more developed a system, the more aware it is of itself; it can talk to itself about itself. This criterion draws upon the psychoanalytic method that promoted self-analysis as a path to health and growth. Highly developed organizations all include the capacity for authentic communication, transparency and employee voice, based on the principle that people in the organization/team are able to talk to each other honestly and courageously about what they really think, feel and want. This requires skillful, appreciative discourse, which values diversity and difference as a source of learning and innovation.

Criterion 2: The more developed a system, the less it is driven by reactive, unconscious emotions, motivations and cognitive frameworks and the more decisions and actions are based on reason, rationality and cognitive complexity. Again, this criterion draws upon Freudian thinking, and the idea that powerful motivations lie outside of conscious awareness. Awareness of our own emotions and defences, for example denial that change

is necessary, leads to levels of emotional development where people are ever more aware of their feelings and motivations. The emphasis here is increasing capacity to think about thinking and feeling. In a developed group/team, people are not afraid to have courageous conversations if these discussions are fundamental for attaining the organization's purpose.

Criterion 3: The more developed the system; the more it is able to actualize its potential. While the notion of actualization is most frequently associated with Maslow (1954), it is latent in psychoanalytic thinking with regard to the realization of an individual's self through integration of opposites, for example Jung's (1933) notion of the 'shadow self'. A developed organizational system embodies awareness of capabilities at individual and team levels that create previously unknown synergies that lead to organizational development, creativity and innovation. This is about growing and nurturing capacities, competencies, core strengths and values.

Bushe's criteria have clear links to the conditions for compassion outlined above in Box 1 with regard to: (i) being open-minded and self aware; (ii) understanding that individuals and institutions have a 'dark side'; (iii) application of insights from psychodynamic theory; and (iv) a commitment to challenging cultural patterns and behaviours.

Slowdown and Think #2

- How comfortable do you feel about having courageous conversations that challenge the status quo and the values that stifle compassion?

Organizational Culture

There is much ambiguity and variation with regard to the nature and definition of organizational culture, and the term is more frequently used as an umbrella concept and way of thinking about cultural and symbolic phenomena in organizations (Alvesson, 2011). Schein (2017: 6) offers a dynamic definition of culture as:

The accumulated shared learning of [a] group as it solves its problems of external *adaptation* and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. [It] is deliberately focused on the general process of how *any culture is learned and will evolve* (emphasis added).

This definition does not specify the size or location of the group or social unit to which it can be reasonably applied. There are *macro* cultures, which may be national, ethnic, disciplinary, or organizational, reflecting diverse, and potentially conflicting, values (see Figure 1).

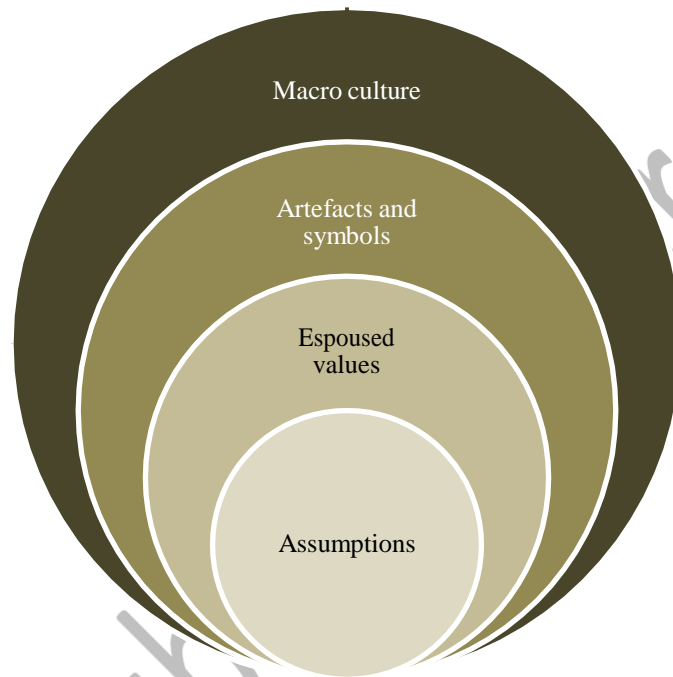


Figure 1: Levels of Culture – Artwork by Hannah Waddington

Schein's work is widely used in the organizational culture literature (e.g. Ganon et al., 2017; Hogan and Coote, 2014; Longman et al., 2018) and his three level model of organizational culture provides an overarching theoretical lens for this chapter. The three levels are: (i) artefacts and symbols; (ii) espoused values and beliefs; and (iii) underlying assumptions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Manifestations of organizational culture ‘**as the organization says it is**’ are artefacts and symbols which are visible both internally and externally and which in some respects are, quite literally, ‘superficial’. These are the evident in things like architecture, websites, content on visual display screens, logos, and patterns of behaviour in meetings and so forth. Artefacts and symbols are things that can be seen and heard, but they do not necessarily tell you *why* you are seeing and hearing them. Manifestations of organizational culture ‘**as it really is and experienced**’, take the form of espoused values and beliefs, and deeper underlying assumptions. Espoused values are formal, ‘official’ statements, presentations and documents that communicate the strategies, principles, ethics, values and vision of the organization. Arguably all universities’ values and strategies say essentially the same thing, albeit in different ways, as a Human Resources (HR) Director commented when interviewed about the relationship between their HR strategy and their university strategy:

We started with the university strategic plan and looked at what that says the organization is here to achieve but as I'm sure you know most university strategic plans, if you boil them down all say the same thing - we will be brilliant at teaching and brilliant at research and brilliant at contributing to the community. (Waddington and Lister, 2010: 6)

Some authors argue that organizational culture and strategy are synonymous (Weick, 2008), and that organizational culture should be an integral factor when considering strategic human resource management (Harrison and Bazzy, 2017). However Peter Drucker’s often quoted phrase: *culture eats strategy for breakfast* still rings true. As reported in Waddington (2012), there is frequently disengagement, disconnection, and dissonance between formally communicated documentation of organizational strategies and values, and day-to-day experience of organizational culture, as illustrated in Box 2.

Box 2: Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast

The University of Arbitrary County (a pseudonym – obviously) provides a short case example of disengagement, disconnected and dissonant communication processes:

The VC [Vice Chancellor] announced a new strategy, which they had discussed with the senior management team [SMT] that was brilliantly espoused in a series of presentations. And in my time in the sector we have never been able to focus upon one thing that is so conceptual and so easily graspable. Yet the staff survey showed a lack of engagement with staff and almost an impermeable membrane. There was a feeling [in the SMT] that the message was not getting down. (HR Director)

Compare the above with a comment from an academic who described the poor communication practices of management: *'The cries going up and down the corridors'*. The underlying meaning was that the cries went unheard, yet the SMT also recognized that: *'Sometimes the ideas that are coming up from the shop floor are brilliant and we need to absorb them'*.

Source: Waddington (2012: 92)

The **'essence of organizational culture'** therefore is found in the underlying tacit assumptions, the taken for granted and jointly learned values and beliefs. These are sometimes described as the things that you stop noticing after working six months in a new organization. As such, this notion as culture as a set of taken-for-granted assumptions and values can lead to blind spots: 'a fixed world within which people adjust, unable to critically explore and transcend existing social constructions' (Alvesson, 2011: 17). The core underpinnings of organizational culture can be revealed through use of metaphor, and recognition of the role of language as a core element of organizational culture (Hogan and Coote, 2014). Adopting this approach enables us to see culture as always emergent and enacted, rather than static and stable. Arguably, when we do this, it brings organizational culture and change *theory* closer to organizational culture and

change *practice*.

Slowdown and Think #3

- Ask yourself: *If my organization were something else what would it be?* Think further and critically, why this particular metaphor? What does it reveal about tacit assumptions and values?

Use of metaphor is a powerful method for exposing and understanding deeper assumptions and values, and the extent to which they are reflected – or not – in the visible artefacts, symbols, and experience of students and staff. I have used metaphor when teaching students about organizational culture. Metaphors generated by students can provide subtle insights that may not necessarily be picked up by ‘sledgehammer’ metrics. The critical thinking process of working with metaphor is illustrated in the following anonymized (and lightly altered to preserve confidentiality without significantly altering meaning) dialogue:

- Kathryn: *If the university were something else what would it be?*
Students: A mobile phone
Kathryn: *Why a mobile phone?*
Students: Because there are some parts of the university where there is a really good signal; in other parts you can't get a signal at all!
Kathryn: *What kind of a phone would it be? – E.g. a state of the art latest version iPhone contract phone?*
Students: Oh no, just a pay-as-you go basic phone!
Kathryn: *Why pay-as-you-go?*
Students: Because you pay every time you come in - with your emotions!

Metaphors and associated imagery be interrogated and questioned further to uncover deeper layers of assumptions and values. Pay-as-you go is more commonly used to describe a system of payment in which bills are paid when they are due or goods and services are paid for when they are bought (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed 6th August 2018 –

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pay-as-you-go>). It reflects a slightly ‘old fashioned’ approach, and I have also had students use metaphors such as the university is ‘like a classic car’ – nice to look at but it can be difficult to get replacement parts. More broadly, a lily pond has been advanced a metaphor for levels of culture, with the visible leaves and blossoms seen as a result of the quality and amount of water in the pond, root systems and nutrients. In other words, as a result of the invisible ‘DNA’ of the pond (Schein, 2017: 27). If you want different colour lilies, painting them a different colour will not work. Leaders intending to change culture must locate the cultural DNA and change some of that.

The Evolution of Compassionate Organizational Cultures

Schein’s (2017) definition of organizational culture, outlined above, is deliberately dynamic, in order to highlight the evolutionary nature of culture in terms of what a group learns in its quest for survival and growth. This chimes with contemporary perspectives on Charles Darwin’s theory that evolution is about adaptation and collaboration (Gardner, 2017). Crucially, ‘scientists have shown that the notion of “*survival of the kindest*” explains more evolutionary success than the “*survival of the fittest*”’ (Kukk, 2017: 13, emphasis added). Indeed it is a myth that Darwin coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’; this has been attributed to Herbert Spencer. In contrast, Darwin in *On the Origin of the Species* argued that communities that included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best (Browne, 2002). Kukk (2017: 11, citing Paul Ekman) argues that what Darwin called sympathy ‘today would be termed empathy, altruism or compassion’. It is important to note however that compassion is not necessarily the *same* as empathy, altruism, pity or sympathy. Gibbs (2017a: 3) offers an ‘opaque’ view of compassion, arguing that only ‘*attentiveness to, and an agency, or willingness to alleviate the suffering of others in order to increase their chosen contentment can be considered compassion*’ (emphasis in original). Similarly Worline and Dutton (2017) define compassion in terms of a four-part process: (i) noticing that suffering is present in an organization; (ii) making meaning of suffering in a way that contributes to a desire to alleviate it; (iii) feeling empathic concern; and (iv) taking

action. Compassion therefore involves both feelings *and* a response; inclusion of responding differentiates it from related concepts like empathy. Compassion can also be understood as an individual response *and* organizational process involving emotions and action (Waddington, 2016). Atkins and Parker (2012) note that in order to enhance compassion in organizations the processes through which compassion can be enhanced in individuals needs to be better understood. They go on to advance the notion of ‘psychological flexibility’, defined as ‘mindfulness combined with *values-directed action* [which] motivate effort to engage in compassionate action’ (524, emphasis added). However, the notion of psychological flexibility is potentially problematic if individual values of compassion do not align with organizational values, culture and climate. For example, in the HRM strategies and academic engagement study an academic focus group respondent commented:

‘I have heard people say that academic staff are an endangered species here, they are seen as a problem... there is a view that academics have become some kind of beast that has to be controlled.’ (Waddington and Lister, 2013: 17)

Compassion (with associated aspects of kindness and empathy) and control (with associated aspects of power and regulation) do not sit well together. The resulting tension can lead to suffering and harm, and is manifest in higher education cultures.

Higher Education Cultures

Suffering is happening in universities for staff and students. Almost a decade ago 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* (141, emphasis added). Things have not improved. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) reports increasing numbers of students suffering with mental health problems (Thorley, 2017). The Universities UK (UUK; 2017) *Step Change Framework* aims to encourage university leaders to adopt a strategic, whole organization, whole population approach to staff and student mental health by providing a:

- case for a strategic approach

- vision
- whole-institution approach
- eight-step framework for achieving the vision.

Smyth's (2017) sociological critique of contemporary higher education cultures and practices challenges the neoliberal ideology that has resulted in academics' sense of loss, damage and despair. Compassion is stifled in environments where instrumental relations and values have dominance, 'where people are used as a means to an end, as commodities rather than respected citizens' (Ballatt and Campling, 2011: 139). In higher education, such instrumental attitudes combined with relentless managerialism, marketization and metrics create toxic environments, and persecutory and overwhelming cultures that can fatally undermine staff morale. Neoliberal ideology and higher education policy models that emphasize the value of free market competition are seemingly at odds with the values of compassion. This has been captured well by Hansen and Trank (2016: 352, emphasis added) who argue:

Our increasingly managerialist perspective seems to go hand in hand with a dispassionate approach to scholarship and a focus on narrowly defined metrics of effectiveness and efficiency. As our scholarship has pursued these narrow economic objectives over the public good and society, we have become a less happy and healthy profession ... It appears *we could not care less* about making a contribution to society and exist to publish for the sake of having been published.

Furthermore, Bergquist and Pawlack (cited in Longman et al., 2018: 4, emphasis added) describe dominant higher education cultures, as 'a *world of the blade*, with a strong emphasis on often subtle but nevertheless quite powerful competition and striving for prestige and dominance'.

The organisational cultures, structures and processes that operate in universities and the relentless political drive on standards, results and student satisfaction, while laudable in principle, can also erode morale. Ineffective management systems were identified by

Watson (2009: 139) as one of the ‘pathologies’ that also undermine positive morale, and which are a source of ‘institutional crisis’. Similarly, Hawkins and Shohet (2012: 229) identified patterns of ‘dysfunctional organisational cultural dynamics’, which are manifest in the following ways:

- Driven by crisis – where there is little time for reflection, thinking and the development of sustainable relationships between different parts of the organisation
- An over-vigilant and bureaucratic culture – which is high on task orientation but low on personal relatedness, and driven by fear of complaints.

Nevertheless, despite this ‘dark side’ of university life, there is also a brighter side emerging in the evidence-base for compassion

The Evidence-base for Compassion

Increasingly, university leaders, scholars and researchers are coming to recognize the importance of compassion in the academy (e.g. Gibbs, 2017b; Kanov et al., 2017; Sheldon and White, 2017). In order to nurture cultures of compassion, organizations require their leaders – as the carriers of culture – to embody compassion in their leadership (West et al., 2017). There is now a growing body of evidence to support the argument that compassion in the work environment improves staff well-being and positively impacts the bottom line (see Kukk, 2017; Poorkavoos, 2016; 2017; Worline and Dutton; 2017). Box 3 summarizes the evidence-base for compassion.

Box 3: The Evidence-base for Compassion

- Those who experience compassionate leadership at work are more likely to report an emotional commitment to their organization and to talk about it in positive terms
- Compassion breeds compassion – those who experience compassion are then more likely to demonstrate it towards others
- Managers who perceive that their organization values their well-being are more likely to show supportive behaviour towards the people they manage
- There are mutual benefits: (i) for people receiving compassion; (ii) the person demonstrating compassion; and (iii) also colleagues who witness compassionate acts
- Experiencing compassion at work: (i) reduces employee turnover and increases organisational citizenship; and (ii) connects co-workers psychologically and results in a stronger bond between them
- Relationships based upon compassion are stronger, more positive and collaborative
- People working in compassionate care-giving organizations (which includes universities) are less likely to experience stress and burnout
- Compassion also can help with growing trust between individuals and creates psychological safety
- This can create a willingness to discuss and learn from errors and failures, talking about them more easily and learning from those mistakes
- Compassionate cultures can result in improved innovation and creativity

Created from: Poorkavoos (2016; 2017); West et al. (2017); Worline and Dutton (2017)

Universities as care-giving organizations need to nurture organizational cultures that ensure the delivery of high-quality research and compassionate pedagogy (Gibbs, 2017b; Kahn, 2005). According to Schneider et al. (cited in West et al., 2017: 4), organizational cultures evolve a result of three influences:

1. The founding values of the organization
2. The early experiences acquired values, norms and behaviours of those joining the organization, via formal and informal induction and organizational socialization processes
3. The behaviour of its leaders.

While founding values are important, they should not tether institutions to ‘old-fashioned’ ways of working, as illustrated in the metaphors of classic cars and pay-as-you-go phones discussed earlier in the chapter. If the ‘**essence of organizational culture**’ lies in underlying tacit assumptions, values and beliefs – the things that you stop noticing – then observations and feedback from newcomers is important. With regard to the behaviour of leaders, West et al. (2017) set out four components of compassionate leadership: attending; understanding; empathizing; and helping. Importantly, a *collective approach to leadership* is necessary. Borrowing from Alexandre Dumas’s ‘all for one and one for all’ approach this means everyone taking responsibility to support each other, and embodying the collective organizational values of compassion. There is shared, rather than dominant, team leadership and a commitment to team development, characterized by openness, curiosity, kindness, authenticity, appreciation and above all compassion. Conversely then, hierarchical and top-down approaches to leadership are ineffective ways of creating compassionate cultures. In summary, a compassionate organization is one:

Where people trust each other and feel it is acceptable to talk about their problems and to seek help and support. In such an organization people know that if they talk about their problems, other colleagues will not judge them and will listen and try to help. (Poorkavoos, 2017: 5)

However, notions of help seeking and support are in conflict with dominant higher education cultures and there are still barriers to compassion that need to be overcome.

Overcoming Barriers to Compassion in Universities

Worline and Dutton (2017: 207) comment: ‘Just as the possibility of human responsiveness to pain is inherent in every system, so too is the possibility that we will turn away from suffering’. They argue that ‘hearts turn to stone’ when interpersonal relationships are characterized by disrespect, incivility and/or a sense of injustice. In organizational cultures of self-interest and a punitive blame approach, it is far less likely

that people will view the well-being of others as part of their work. Furthermore when systems offer little room for creative job crafting – the ways in which employees use opportunities to customize their jobs by actively changing their tasks and interactions with others – people are less likely to build compassion into their work practices.

Workplaces characterized by overload lead to ‘empathy fatigue’, a form of emotional exhaustion which makes it less likely that people will notice other people’s suffering and limits feelings of concern.

Poorkavoos’s (2016; 2017) mixed methods research across a range of industries (public sector, private sector, manufacturing, and not for profit) found that barriers to compassion reported by participants fell into one of three categories:

1. *Organizational culture related barriers*: These related to cultural norms of what is perceived as acceptable/inacceptable in the work place and performance pressure from senior management. Additionally some managers did not feel empowered to make decisions themselves that would enable them to act in a compassionate manner.
2. *Individual circumstances related barriers*: These related to time pressures, and being too busy to stop and show care, and being fearful of crossing unseen boundaries. Low emotional intelligence and an instrumental focus on getting the job done whatever the cost were also cited as barriers.
3. *Policy and procedural related barriers*: These related to a perception that HR policies were too restrictive and rigidly followed, which did not allow for adaptation to individual circumstances.

Slowdown and Think #4

- Step back and think about time when you may have missed an opportunity to give or receive compassion because of the above organizational culture, individual circumstances, or policy/procedural barriers?

Missed opportunities for compassion can be re-framed as ‘critical moments’, which:

Occur wherever people make *meaning and coordinate actions with each other*.
[They] occur everywhere: at dinner tables, in conference halls and boardroom ...
when responding to emergencies, in classrooms and consultations, during political
campaigns and public hearings. (Pearce, 2007: 11-12, emphasis added)

Critical moments occur when we experience dissonance, for example a conflict of values. Compassion grows when we enhance our ability to discern those critical moments, and then act wisely into them. For example, in Waddington (2016) I reflected upon critical moments, which were formed of multiple fragments from conversations with colleagues, observations made during meetings and emails. Words like '*terminated*', '*excluded*', '*viability*' and '*obsolete*' when used to describe students, courses and modules reflect an undercurrent of indifference. Importantly, as Koutselini (2017: 204) notes, there must be 'a reflective and responding character in compassion'. Universities are sites of learning and education; storied worlds where narratives of care and compassion can be surfaced through reflecting and responding, in order to:

- Challenge the 'objectification and measurement' of students and staff, which reduces people to faceless resources to be manipulated and managed
- Be more attentive to the language and representations of compassion in everyday experience.

Reflection upon critical moments, combined with individual and organizational development methods, for example action learning and coaching, creates a powerful new paradigm for creating and sustaining compassionate cultures and practices.

A New Paradigm for Universities?

Returning to Bushe's (2017) criteria introduced earlier in the chapter, successful organizational and cultural change rests upon the following paradigmatic assumptions:

- The more developed a system, the more aware it is of itself; it can talk to itself about itself
- The more developed a system, the less it is driven by reactive, unconscious

- emotions, motivations and cognitive frameworks and the more decisions and actions are based on reason, rationality and cognitive complexity
- The more developed the system; the more it is able to actualize its potential.

The question mark over this part in the chapter is because arguably the paradigm, which draws upon psychodynamic systems thinking and humanistic psychology, is simply ‘old wine in new bottles’? However I contend that when combined with: (i) critical reflection; (ii) coaching with compassion; and (iii) action learning, it offers a strong steer for individual, team and organizational development and culture change in our universities. Pässilä and Vince (2016) identify four characteristics of critical reflection that differentiate it from other approaches to reflection. Firstly, the reflective task is to identify and question taken-for-granted beliefs and values. Secondly, particular attention is paid to the analysis of power relations and the relationship between power and knowledge. Thirdly, critical reflection implies a shift in focus away from an individual perspective towards a collective, situated process. Finally, reflection on socially constructed, collective experience highlights political, emotional and ethical dimensions and dynamics.

Turning now to coaching with compassion, Boyatzis et al. (2012: 156) propose that this enhances the adaptability of organizations through creating norms and relationships of caring and development. Its aims are to:

Further the coachee’s development by focusing on their Ideal Self and on their strengths more than their weaknesses. Instrumental coaching and coaching toward the Ought Self can be called *coaching for compliance*, defined as coaching another to comply with an authority’s or an organization’s view of how they should act, often inducing a defensiveness or sense of guilt (Boyatzis et al., 2006). We argue that coaching with compassion leads to more positive outcomes than coaching for compliance and deficit-based coaching. (Emphasis in original)

Importantly, Boyatzis et al. offer an expanded view of compassion, challenging the assumption that compassion must *always and only* be a response to distress, pain, or suffering. Under this expanded view they argue that a manager can also demonstrate

compassion by noticing an employee is excited and optimistic about, for example, moving to a new role in the organization. Coaching with compassion in this instance would involve helping them understand what they need to do to effectively prepare themselves for transition and change. This also re-frames coaching in a positive light, away from deficit-focused instrumental coaching, promoting greater acceptance of a coaching culture.

Harding (n.d.) and Kapoutzis (n.d.) describe the stages and processes involved in creating and developing coaching cultures in two UK universities. These include senior team engagement, developing a strong business case, and building the external and internal coaching capacity. All of this takes time, and requires some fundamental shifts as Kapoutzis (p. 4) notes:

For us to achieve what felt at the beginning to be a very nebulous and highly utopian coaching culture, fundamental rules and habits of interacting, managing and engaging with each other had to shift.

Action learning is a method of supporting people through organisational cultural change (see Waddington and Hardy, 2014). It involves a continuous process of learning and reflection that occurs with the support of a group or 'set' of colleagues working collaboratively. Working with action learning presumes core values, assumptions and ideas (McGill and Brockbank, 2004), which include:

- Membership of a set is voluntary
- Confidentiality and trust
- Commitment to the process
- Learning as a social and collaborative process
- Support and challenge
- Quality of attention
- Empathy

Action learning is therefore a powerful vehicle for developing compassionate cultures and practices (Waddington, forthcoming). By way of a brief example from my recent

experience of participating in action learning, a small but significant action was to pay more attention to, and *notice*, the tone and content of email and other forms of communication. This was coupled with the notion of being an ‘active bystander’ and calling attention to positive examples of compassionate practices. However it is naïve to assume that action learning can only be, and always is, ‘a good thing’ (Vince, 2012). It is important to have an understanding of how emotions, power and politics influence the processes of action learning in volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Critical action learning, which incorporates critical, collective reflection as outlined above is an appropriate approach, which ensures:

Individuals’ questioning insight is undertaken in the context of collective emotional dynamics, linked to unconscious processes and complex inter-personal relations, as well as the everyday politics that surround them. (Vince, 2012: 213)

VUCA is a U.S. military term for an unpredictable, turbulent and rapidly changing organizational context, characterized as:

- **Volatile:** Change happens rapidly and on a large scale
- **Uncertain:** The future cannot be predicted with any precision
- **Complex:** Challenges are complicated by many factors and there are few single causes or solutions
- **Ambiguous:** There is little clarity on what events mean and what effect they may have before becoming disastrous.

Stewart et al. (2016: 241), writing in a higher education context, note:

VUCA forces will present businesses with the need to move from linear modes of thought to problem solving with synthetic and simultaneous thinking. They cannot be ignored as hidden in the challenges are the essential opportunities that are necessary for survival and sustainability.

Schein (2017) argues that as the world becomes more turbulent, a greater degree of flexibility is required because, paradoxically, the process of creating organizational

culture is potentially dysfunctional because it stabilizes things. Therefore we need to ask: What would a culture look like that favored perpetual learning and flexibility?’

Bringing it all Together

In conclusion, and to answer the question ‘what might a compassionate learning culture look like?’ I return, for the final time, to Schein’s (2017) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Schein identifies ten components of a learning culture, all of which can be infused with compassion, summarized here as: ‘noticing another’s need, empathizing, and acting to enhance their well-being’ (Boyatzis et al., 2012: 153). Schein’s components/approaches to creating and leading a learning culture are:

1. **Proactivity:** this approach rejects fatalistic assumptions of passive acceptance of change, advocating instead confident, proactive problem solving and learning. However it is more important to be *committed to the learning process*, than to identifying any particular solution to a problem.
2. **Commitment to ‘learning to learn’:** a learning culture needs in its DNA a ‘learning gene’ – the shared assumption that learning to learn is a skill which requires investment (of time and resources), reflection, experimentation and action. It also includes willingness to ask for – and accept – help, and also accept errors and failure as learning opportunities.
3. **Positive assumptions about human nature:** learning leaders need to have faith in people, and a belief that ultimately human nature is essentially good, and in any case, malleable. Assumptions that people are lazy and self-seeking create cynical attitudes and self-fulfilling prophecies.
4. **A belief that the environment can be managed:** this relates to the shared assumption that the environment is to some extent manageable, and is reflected in the concept of ‘lead and disrupt’. Organizations that survive and thrive retain their core values and simultaneously build new and adaptive cultures and ways of working.
5. **Commitment to ‘truth’ through inquiry and dialogue:** this is the shared assumption that solutions to problems and learning are derived from a deep

- commitment to inquiry and a pragmatic search for ‘truth’. Learning is a shared endeavor, and requires leaders at all levels to build personal, open and trusting relationships with colleagues at all levels.
6. ***Positive orientation towards the future:*** this involves thinking far enough ahead to judge the consequences – intended and unintended – of actions, and simultaneously thinking in terms of the near future to judge whether or not actions are working.
 7. ***Commitment to full and open task-relevant communication:*** a learning culture is built on the assumption that communication and information are central to individual and institutional well-being. Full task-relevant information is built upon trust and truth telling.
 8. ***Commitment to cultural diversity:*** the more turbulent the environment, the more likely it is that organizations with culturally diverse resources are better able to cope with and adapt to unpredicted events.
 9. ***Commitment to systemic thinking:*** in an increasing complex and interdependent world it is necessary to abandon simplistic linear thinking in favour of more complex mental models.
 10. ***Belief in the value of internal cultural analysis:*** this involves collective reflection and analysis in order to reveal and better understand the organization’s values, power dynamics, decision-making processes and expectations.

In summary, a compassionate leader, as well as being a compassionate person, encourages compassion and caring in the wider organisation. A compassionate leader encourages employees to talk about their difficulties *and* opportunities for growth and development (Boyatzis et al., 2012; Poorkavoos, 2016; West et al., 2017). Compassionate leadership is about trying to create a culture whereby seeking or providing help is not just acceptable but is seen as the norm.

Slowdown and Think # 5

- Which of the ten components of a compassionate learning culture can you apply to your own role and practice in order to promote and provoke change in your

workplace?

The idea for *Slowdown and Think* activities came to me at a structured writing retreat when working on an early draft of this chapter. To recap, the term was chosen in order to disrupt the relentless pressures and demands of contemporary university life. The pressure to publish is universal, and research is a priority in every university strategy. However, as Murray and Newton (2009: 551) note, ‘the writing element of research is not universally experienced as a mainstream activity’. We need ‘pauses’ in our work in order to be kind to ourselves, and others, and also to protect and enhance the quality of our work (Berg and Seeber, 2016). I would argue that this also enables a return to the core values of the university – intellectual curiosity, thoughtful dialogue and courage to challenge existing paradigms and ideologies.

I will end with a final note of caution: *The commodification of compassion must be avoided at all costs*. In the current climate, I fear it may be all too easy for compassion to become the panacea for papering over the cracks in dysfunctional institutional systems and cultures. There is a danger of compassion becoming just another ‘flavour of the month’ buzzword, and a consequent risk that it could lose its power and potential to influence change in organizational values and cultures. As Davis’s (2008: 67) critique of ‘intersectionality as a buzzword’ argues, it is crucial to maintain a critical perspective. As discussed earlier, a critical perspective is one that acknowledges the influence of power and power dynamics and relations in organizations: ‘the differences of class, gender, or race that make a difference to our everyday feelings and behaviour at work’ (Vince, 2010: 211). There is a further risk that individualistic, reductionist psychological perspectives, which emphasize personal responsibility for well-being, happiness and resilience, fail to take into account wider organizational, social and contextual realities. Academic leaders, managers and human resources organizational development practitioners must resist the commodification of compassion, and look beyond individualistic approaches in order to create conditions for compassionate university cultures to flourish.

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