

Compassion is an effective managerial strategy, expert says

May 22 2015, by Emma Seppala



Compassionate managers end up with more loyal and productive workers, according to research by Emma Seppala, associate director of Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

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](#).

The Stanford News Service recently interviewed Seppala on the topic:

How should a manager react when an employee is not performing well or makes a mistake?

The traditional response is a reprimand of some sort. After all, the employee's behavior may very well reflect poorly on you as a manager or even the whole team. The idea behind the reprimand is that it will serve not only as a warning to the employee but to the rest of the team. Checks and balances help ensure that everyone stays on their toes.

However, despite its apparent logic, research is showing that this traditional punishment approach may end up doing more ill than good.

What is wrong with the traditional approach of reprimand? What does the research say?

The problem with this type of approach is that it increases [stress levels](#) which – when they are high – can disrupt the culture of an organization. Moreover, we know from brain-imaging research that, under chronic and high stress, the ability to think clearly and reason is compromised. If your employees are constantly operating from a place of fear, chances are that their productivity and decision-making will take a hit.

What's more, their ability to be creative and to think innovatively will also diminish. Why? Because they will be less willing to take chances

and go out on a limb, for fear of being punished. Given steep competition in the marketplace and the critical importance of innovation to keep up with competing businesses, [managers](#) should be particularly mindful to keep their organizational culture positive.

Moreover, considering that stress-related problems cost organizations in the U.S. workforce over \$300 billion a year, managers everywhere should be working hard to keep stress levels low.

Finally, if you are hard on an employee or punish them in some way, chances are that you will damage the relationship with that employee. Their trust in you and loyalty toward you may very likely decrease. Research shows that employees are particularly sensitive to trust in their managers. Anger can significantly reduce that trust. Research also shows that when managers display anger, they may appear more powerful in the moment but their employees will actually come to view them as less effective.

What is a better alternative to punishment?

When an employee has made a mistake, approach them from a place that is compassionate. Of course, a part of you may be upset, but adopting a compassionate response will actually get you and your employee better results. Here's why:

Your employee will become loyal to you. We know from research that loyalty is not about the paycheck, it's about the relationship the employee has with you. If you display admirable qualities that move the employee – for example, you display kindness rather than anger – chances are that employee will become more loyal to you and will, in turn, emulate your behavior.

A compassionate response will also build trust. Your employee will feel

that, even when he is not performing, his manager will give him a chance to do better. You can even see the impact of a trustworthy manager at the level of an employee's brain. A neuroimaging study showed that thinking about managers who have shown empathy activates brain areas that correspond to positive emotions. In turn, trusting employees end up performing better.

Research is showing that a happier workplace is a workplace with less turnover and where employees are more productive and take less sick days.

What types of bosses are employees more drawn to?

The data suggests that employees are drawn to managers that are kind and that they can trust. They also value a manager to whom they can look up to for his or her human qualities and values.

After all, employees spend a large portion of their life at work – it shouldn't come as a surprise that they prefer to feel happy there. Given data from a Gallup survey showing that 70 percent of workers are currently disengaged at work – a fact that drastically affects worker productivity – it should be every managers' prerogative to ensure a happy workplace culture.

I'm not suggesting that managers not express dissatisfaction or point out errors. However, they should be skillful and kind in how they choose to communicate with underperforming employees. They can choose to explore the reasons behind what happened and engage the employee in a conversation on how to prevent similar mistakes from happening in the future.

Some people may argue that they simply don't have the time for this type of leadership style. Others will argue that their job is too fast-paced and

stressful to be able to focus on compassionate communication with employees.

James Doty, the director of Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education – and a neurosurgeon – points out that these types of arguments are erroneous. Brain surgery is arguably one of the most stressful jobs. Mistakes can lead to serious consequences. Yet Doty makes time to address errors with compassion:

"It's not that I let them off the hook, but by choosing a compassionate response when they know they have made a mistake, they are not destroyed, they have learned a lesson, and they want to improve for you because you've been kind to them."

The following three steps can help cultivate a compassionate mindset:

Be mindful

Take a moment to gather yourself and your thoughts. You don't want to speak rashly or act out of emotion. If you are upset, wait until your feelings diminish so that you can approach your employee from a calmer place. Practicing meditation or breathing exercises can help boost your ability to regulate your emotions and act from a mindful place.

Learn to empathize

Perspective-taking is key. 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 taking a toll, or feeling overwhelmed. Once you can really take on that perspective and understand where they are coming from, you are less likely to want to take a harsh approach to your employee.

Forgive

While harboring anger actually increases your heart rate and blood pressure and is linked to cardiovascular disease, forgiveness lowers your [blood pressure](#). Research shows that the ability to forgive not only helps your employee, it significantly boosts your own health and psychological well-being as well.

Provided by Stanford University

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