

Self-compassion helps leaders and their workers, according to management expert

October 12 2021, by Bob Needham



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When leaders actively practice compassion toward themselves, it benefits both them and their employees.

That doubly rewarding finding comes in a new study co-authored by Sue Ashford, a professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business.

"We tend to think of leadership as a universally good thing, so we don't fully account for the hardships of leadership—we don't think of self-[compassion](#) as something that's particularly needed or important," Ashford said. "But without self-compassion, the hardships can lead you to think, 'If I'm having such trouble with this role, am I really a leader at all?' We found that self-compassion helps you to hold onto your identity as a leader."

The researchers conducted an experiment in which leaders engaged in a brief self-compassion exercise on certain days. The leaders were asked to write up an experience in which they were understanding and patient toward themselves while facing a leadership challenge.

On days they did this exercise, the study found that the leaders identified more strongly with their leadership role. As a result, they offered more help to their employees—both with work tasks and personal problems—on those days than on days they did not do the exercise.

In addition, [workers](#) on those days perceived their leaders as more competent and more civil, making the exercise a win-win.

"Self-compassion helps you be more leader-like, which creates a more positive impression of you, but it also helps the people around you," Ashford said. "So even if you do it out of self-interest, it's going to have a positive impact on the people around you as well."

Ashford says organizations or individuals could adopt the self-compassion exercise in their regular work life. Even if it's not done in writing, similar benefits could come from a focused reflection during,

say, the morning commute, she says.

Such an exercise might prove particularly beneficial to people new to [leadership](#), who aren't as comfortable with their role.

"A lot of research suggests that we're not very compassionate toward ourselves; that we're pretty hard on ourselves," Ashford said. "If you can shift how you see yourself to a more compassionate stance, many benefits occur. There are ways to build the idea into your life more fully, and that's what I'd recommend."

The paper, co-authored by Klodiana Lanaj and Remy Jennings of the University of Florida, and Satish Krishnan of the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Self-compassion helps leaders and their workers, according to management expert (2021, October 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-self-compassion-leaders-workers-expert.html>

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