



Shared Insights

Compassionate Leadership and Culture

Helen Badger, Partner, Browne Jacobson
Alison Bell, Senior Manager, Freedom to Speak up at NHS England

Rebecca Solesbury, Deputy Director, OD and HR Transformation Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Trust

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**Browne
Jacobson**

Browne Jacobson Partner and employment specialist Helen Badger was delighted to be joined by Alison Bell from NHS England and Rebecca Solesbury from Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Trust to discuss the importance of compassionate leadership and practical tips on how to foster a culture which supports that.

What is compassionate leadership and why does it matter?

We were pleased to show a video from the King's Fund presented by Professor Michael West, King's Fund Visiting Fellow.

In that video, Professor West acknowledged that public services are under enormous pressure and said that compassionate leadership is a core value at the heart of health and social care systems.

Professor West discussed the four elements of compassionate leadership, which he explained are:

- **Attending.** Compassionate leaders take time to listen to the obstacles, challenges and frustrations of colleagues as well as listening to their successes. This means being present and 'listening with fascination'.
- **Understanding.** Compassionate leaders do not have all the answers and they do not simply tell people what to do. They take time to properly explore and understand the situations their teams are struggling with. This means listening to and valuing different perspectives rather than simply imposing the leader's own understanding on the rest of the team.

- **Empathising.** Compassionate leaders demonstrate empathy and feel colleagues' distress, frustration and joy without being overwhelmed by the emotion to the extent that they become unable to help.
- **Helping.** Compassionate leaders take action to help individuals and teams. Examples will include removing blockers to effective performance (such as chronic excessive workloads, conflicts between departments) and providing the resources people and services need to be able to do their work (such as staff, equipment and training).

Professor West explained that compassion is the most important leadership and culture intervention there is in health and social care for both patients and staff. He said that there is clear evidence that people who work in supportive teams with clear goals and compassionate leadership are less stressed and more engaged, resulting in better outcomes and higher-quality care for patients.

Professor West also discussed the challenges in implementing compassionate leadership and creating a compassionate culture. These include poor working conditions, poor leadership, role confusion and excessive workload.



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Compassionate Leadership and Culture – Practical Tips

**Helen Badger,
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Other key takeaways from the video included:

- Every interaction gives an opportunity to shape culture
- Leaders should model the 4 compassionate behaviours
- Listening is a vital skill for compassionate leaders.
- Compassionate leadership should not be seen as a soft option and can help leaders effectively manage the performance of individuals, teams, organisations and systems. It requires more courage than a command and control style of leadership. A strong focus on performance and performance management creates effective teams and organisations.
- For leadership to be compassionate it must also be inclusive. Compassionate leaders create an inclusive, psychologically safe environment where diversity in all forms is valued. Diversity and inclusion brings a greater wealth of knowledge and skills to teams.
- Team working and a sense of contribution are powerful factors
- Avoid overwhelm which leads to high stress levels and staff leaving
- Encourage a climate of justice and fairness rather than fear and blame
- To foster compassionate leadership, leaders need to be self-compassionate

If you would like to learn more about how you can develop your own compassionate leadership practice, The King's Fund has a free short online course, [An introduction to leading with kindness and compassion in health and social care](#), for anyone working in or interested in health and social care in its broadest sense, regardless of sector, experience or role.

The King's Fund Resources

[The King's Fund publish these resources on compassionate leadership](#)

If you would like to show the King's Fund video presented by Professor Michael West in your organisation, please contact the Leadership & Organisational Development team by email: leadership@kingsfund.org.uk.

Practical Tips

Helen Badger, Browne Jacobson

Helen explained that as a specialist employment lawyer she sees 3 common barriers to achieving a compassionate culture

- Time
- Work overload
- Performance pressure.

There is a clear link to the Freedom to Speak Up agenda. Helen talked about the 4 areas outlined by Professor West in his video in the context of a speak up culture:

- **Attendance** - Being present. Individuals feel more able to speak up if they can see leaders and know they are approachable.
- **Understanding** - It is important to listen when someone raises a concern. Focus on 'what' rather than 'who' to foster removal of blame culture.
- **Empathy** - Respond with empathy e.g. thank you for coming to me with this concern, I appreciate this may have been hard to do etc.
- **Help** - What is the organisation going to do about it? What can I do personally to respond to the concern? Feedback to the person involved about how their concern will be addressed. Be honest when a problem cannot be solved about the steps that have been taken.

Compassionate Leadership and Culture – Practical Tips

Rebecca Solesbury, Deputy Director of OD and HR Transformation Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Trust

&

Alison Bell, Senior Manager, Freedom to Speak up at NHS England

Alison Bell, NHS England

Alison has a wealth of experience as a Freedom to Speak up Guardian in a large acute NHS Trust and now in her role at NHS England.

She explained that we know that organisations have speak up policies in place and NHS England published the national speak up policy in June 2022 which you can find [here](#)

However, even with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in place, policies alone are not enough to change the culture within the NHS.

It is human nature to want to belong to the tribe and speaking up can be hard because it can threaten that sense of belonging.

Encourage leaders to take that small amount of time to listen and display compassionate leadership when someone voices something that is troubling them. They will find that costs and time can be saved rather than dealing with the fall out later.

Dealing compassionately with reported unusual behaviours sends a message that you are listening and that you are approaching situations in a collaborative way rather than fostering an “*us against them*” culture. Examples of ways of approaching this include “*coffee conversations*”, e.g. asking why someone is exhibiting “*behaviours that are not really you*” and “*how can we help*”

NHS England have lots of useful resources on compassionate leadership which you can find [here](#)

Rebecca Solesbury, Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Trust

Rebecca shared some examples of different approaches and messages used to communicate the value placed on compassionate leadership by her Trust:

- Staff conferences promoting messages of compassion and setting out vision across whole organisation
- Inclusivity is a golden thread throughout compassion – authentic inclusivity gives a feeling of belonging, encouraging people to bring their whole self to work
- Reflect and reconnect times – protected time for teams to come together to listen to each other and understand challenges
- Focus on learning and speak up culture with principles of just culture
- Encouraging leaders across the organisation to manage expectations and be realistic
- Using the power of stories - Protected time for listening events where staff can share stories, challenges and frustrations
- Supervision and appraisal documentation tweaked to form part of compassionate journey
- Close working with the Communications Team to ensure visibility including:
 - consistent messages
 - wellbeing e.g. reminders to look after selves, take regular breaks, join in events
 - encouraging staff to be self-compassionate
 - regular videos from Chief Executive and other leaders role modelling compassionate behaviour.

Discussion & How we can help

Discussion

We discussed a number of themes including:

- Board engagement, the importance of role modelling behaviours and making sure there is not a disconnect between messaging and what is actually happening on the ground
- Being open when you have got this wrong – people will notice if leaders' actions do not match the organisation's messaging
- The importance of inclusivity and a feeling of belonging in staff retention and recruitment
- Positive outcomes from staff surveys done quarterly (rather than annually) and bespoke short surveys with 3 or 4 directed questions which are followed up afterwards
- The impact of remote working and the importance of retaining the personal touch and face to face discussion when possible
- Maximising some of the positive outcomes of the pandemic, such as more flexible working creating a better work/life balance and a more compassionate workplace.
- Giving people the tools, skills and resources they need to manage compassionately
- The importance of getting the message across that being compassionate does not take any more time but can significantly improve outcomes.
- Whilst we can't always wave a magic wand to tackle overwork, consider the small things that can be done to make a difference.
- Having challenging conversations is an important element of compassionate leadership but it has to be done in the right way, utilising true listening and understanding.
- Patients do pick up on team culture when they come into hospital and it is significant to them that the culture and intention of the staff is positive.

A number of initiatives were shared including:

- Email from Directorate Lead delivering updates with a personal touch e.g. commenting on local events or staff birthdays which encourage conversations taking place "casually" before issues escalate.
- Cuppa and a chat
- Role modelling and listening sessions which allow people to feel seen and heard
- Remembering that kindness in every interaction that you have is what will be remembered
- More regular check ins than the yearly appraisal process
- Tea for Three initiative – half an hour chat once a month with a group of three from different teams
- Staff led networks focused on inclusion
- Protected time for meaningful and honest 1-1s
- Wellbeing Bus on Trust sites to give staff time and space to have a break and treat

How we can help

There are many ways we can help organisations and leaders to create a compassionate culture:

- Training at all levels (board, middle management, frontline) on Speaking Up and compassionate people practices;
- Supporting organisations to identify and tackle problematic team cultures through cultural reviews;
- Developing policies and practices that support and embed a just and learning culture.

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