

Leading in Difficult Times: A Look at the Process by Which Principals' Compassionate Leadership Influences Teacher Attitudes and Behaviour

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Abstract

Organizational leaders worldwide faced significant challenges managing operations during COVID-19, and schools were no exception. The quick transition to virtual classrooms placed additional strain on school teachers already dealing with the pandemic. These teachers required compassionate leadership to guide them through the crisis. With teacher stress at a record high, compassionate leadership became crucial for navigating these difficult times. Despite increasing evidence of the positive effects of compassionate leadership, researchers have not fully explored its theoretical and empirical connections to teacher attitudes and behaviors. The literature lacks a detailed examination of how compassionate principals affect teachers' work attitudes and behaviors. To address this gap, we propose a comprehensive conceptual model grounded in theories of trust, positive emotions, and self-efficacy. This model examines the relationships between compassionate leadership and teachers' work attitudes, including resilience, work engagement, psychological well-being, and job performance. Our study, which included school teachers, tested this conceptual model and found that compassionate leadership by school principals significantly impacts teachers' resilience, work engagement, psychological well-being, and job performance. These findings highlight the vital role of compassionate leadership in educational settings and suggest that school principals and other educational leaders should cultivate this leadership style. We also recommend future research directions and discuss the implications for organizational and school leadership during crises.

Keywords: Compassionate leadership, Positive Emotions, Self-Efficacy, Resilience, Work Engagement, Job Performance

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Introduction

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 posed an unprecedented threat to humanity, causing widespread distress and disruption across all sectors. Organizations worldwide faced immense pressure to navigate through the crisis, with particular emphasis on managing human resources effectively. School systems were no exception, grappling with the sudden shift to virtual learning and its profound impact on traditional teaching methods. Despite personal hardships faced by educators, including loss and financial strain, they remained committed to ensuring uninterrupted education for their students. Upon the eventual reopening of schools, teachers encountered altered environments and increased workloads, exacerbating feelings of anxiety and stress. In India, where the pandemic caused significant upheaval, the transition to virtual classrooms took a toll on teachers' well-being. Research underscores the detrimental effects of stress on both individual teachers and their work performance, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing psychological health during crises.

In such challenging times, compassionate leadership emerges as a crucial factor in supporting teachers' resilience and well-being. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and understanding can alleviate stress and foster positive emotions among their staff. This article proposes that compassionate school principals play a vital role in enhancing teachers' attitudes and job performance by promoting positive emotions and self-efficacy.

A conceptual framework is presented to illustrate how compassionate leadership influences various aspects of teacher well-being and performance, with trust serving as a key component. Practical guidelines are suggested for school principals to bolster teacher resilience and engagement through self-efficacy and positive emotions. Additionally, implications for future research and leadership practices are discussed. Our study highlights the significance of trust, positive emotions, and self-efficacy in the compassionate leadership process, drawing upon established theories in organizational psychology. By elucidating the mechanisms through which compassionate leaders impact teacher outcomes, this framework offers insights for leadership development and intervention strategies. Ultimately, this study aims to address the question of how compassionate leadership shapes teachers' attitudes and performance, providing a foundation for further exploration in this area. As we navigate the challenges of the pandemic, this research serves as a timely resource for educators and leaders striving to mitigate its impact on education.

Understanding Compassion

Compassion, a concept deeply rooted in ancient teachings, involves sharing in the pain and suffering of others. The word itself originates from Latin, meaning "to suffer with" (Spreitzer et al., 2013). While there have been various attempts to define compassion, it goes beyond mere empathy, encompassing an active desire to alleviate suffering through action (Lilius et al., 2008). Researchers emphasize three key components of compassion: empathetic understanding, caring for others, and a willingness to act (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Compassion involves not only recognizing suffering but also actively seeking to relieve it. Paul Gilbert describes it as sensitivity to suffering with a commitment to alleviate it (Gilbert, 2014). In practice, compassion entails noticing suffering, empathizing with others, and taking action to alleviate their pain. It involves not only emotional resonance but also a genuine desire to help (Strauss et al., 2016). The scientific community's growing focus on compassion is becoming increasingly evident. Researchers have identified four fundamental attributes of compassion:

cognitive knowledge of pain, emotional resonance, intentional desire to alleviate suffering, and motivational readiness to assist (Singer & Bolz, 2013).

Compassion in Organizational Contexts

Compassion in the workplace is a powerful tool for addressing employees' suffering. It involves demonstrating warmth, care, and kindness towards colleagues and subordinates (Dutton et al., 2006). Research shows that compassionate responses positively impact employee performance and well-being, fostering positive emotions, reducing stress, and enhancing commitment to the organization (Lilius et al., 2008). As research into workplace compassion grows, its importance for organizational effectiveness and employee well-being becomes increasingly evident. Compassion not only improves workplace relationships but also boosts employee performance, particularly in caregiving roles or environments with emotionally demanding work (Frost et al., 2000). Compassion is proven to be rewarding in workplaces where employees are caregivers or regularly work with emotionally fatigued co-workers. It fosters a supportive organizational environment, enhances employee commitment, and improves overall performance outcomes (O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006).

Leadership With Compassion

The global landscape, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has revealed a significant leadership crisis marked by a lack of compassion among leaders (Friedman et al., 2017). Research underscores the critical role of compassionate leadership in fostering thriving organizational cultures, particularly in environments marred by toxicity and disengagement (Friedman et al., 2017). Compassionate leadership, characterized by empathy, availability, and kindness, extends care not only to employees but also to customers and society at large. Effective compassionate leaders prioritize the well-being of their team, fostering strong relationships and facilitating open discussions about challenges (Briner & Pritchard, 1997).

The impact of compassionate leadership extends beyond morale; it positively influences organizational productivity and resilience. Research indicates that compassionate leaders inspire commitment, enhance employee well-being, and foster a culture of care and support (Dutton et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2011). Compassionate leadership provides employees with a sense of safety and empowerment, promoting resilience and organizational performance, especially during crises like Covid-19, (Dutton et al., 2002). In both crisis and normalcy, compassionate leadership proves instrumental in shaping organizational cultures of care and well-being. By prioritizing empathy and support, leaders can cultivate environments where employees feel valued, respected, and supported, ultimately contributing to organizational happiness and success (Frost et al., 2000; De Zulueta, 2015).

Promoting Compassion in Schools

Compassion is paramount in a school environment. Schools are more than just a venue for students; they are also places of work for teachers who hold emotions as any ordinary human person does (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Barsade et al., 2003; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Robinson et al., 2013). Besides giving and receiving affection and emotions towards students, teachers, too, give and receive them toward one another. Contemporary organizational psychology research has revealed that emotions are present in employees at work and can all the more influence organizational outcomes. Accordingly, investigating teachers as compassion receivers has become particularly crucial.

Furthermore, research findings confirm the potential positive influence of compassion on teacher well-being, attitudes, and behavior as they are consistent with the findings of studies conducted in other job-related areas (Kahn, 1998; Hallowell, 1999; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Dutton, 2003; Frost, 2003; Shuler & Sypher, 2000; Grandey et al., 2005; Hayward & Tuckey, 2011). While research on compassion and its influence on organizational outcomes (such as employee engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and performance) is expanding significantly in organizational psychology, it has received less attention in educational psychology. Researchers in educational psychology have so far mainly concentrated on the impact of compassionate and kind teachers on the success, performance, and well-being of their students. Thus, educational psychology has primarily focused on how compassion influences students, ignoring how it can impact other school employees, particularly teachers.

The Role of Principals' Compassionate Leadership

As school principals' leadership skills and behavior influence teachers' efficacy, job satisfaction, engagement levels, and trust (Hipp & Bredeson, 1995; Koh et al., 1995; Bogler, 2001; Dipaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bird et al., 2009), it is necessary to study the relationships between the compassionate leadership of school principals and trust, work attitudes, and performance of teachers. We base upon organizational psychology theory and research to propose a model that demonstrates the impact of school principals' compassionate leadership on teachers' desirable work attitudes and performance through the mediators, viz., positive emotions and self-efficacy. The model also examines the function of compassion from school principals as a coping strategy when teachers undergo crisis moments and proposes that positive emotions and self-efficacy act as mediators of these relationships. The overarching notion here is that workplace compassion from school principals can alleviate the sufferings and unavoidable pressures of teaching and serve as a coping strategy in times of crisis. Thus, we suggest that compassionate leadership of school principals will positively influence teachers' work attitudes, such as resilience, work engagement, and psychological well-being, and desirable job performance.

Self-Efficacy Through Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership fosters an environment that nurtures employees' self-efficacy, contributing to their well-being and performance (Hebles et al., 2022). Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997), is a person's belief in their capability to efficiently complete a task or job. It significantly influences individuals' perception, motivation, and performance. Individuals with higher self-efficacy perceive challenges as opportunities for growth, demonstrating intrinsic motivation and dedication to their work (Bandura, 1997). Conversely, those with lower self-efficacy tend to avoid challenges and exhibit lower commitment to their goals (Bandura, 1997). Research indicates that compassionate leadership positively influences self-efficacy among employees, leading to increased self-confidence and productivity (Grant, 2008). Additionally, psychological safety, facilitated by compassionate leadership, aids in overcoming stress and intolerance, thereby enhancing self-efficacy (Zhou & Chen, 2021).

Compassionate school principals play a crucial role in creating a positive work environment, enhancing self-efficacy among teachers (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016). By providing emotional support and constructive feedback, compassionate leaders help develop teachers' belief in their capabilities, ultimately impacting their job performance positively. Therefore, adopting

compassionate leadership in schools can increase self-efficacy, leading to positive teacher work attitudes and performance outcomes.

Positive Emotions Through Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership is crucial for evoking positive emotions among teachers, thereby improving attitudes and performance (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Eldor & Shoshani, 2016). Positive emotions elicited by compassionate principals create a trusting environment, enhancing teacher well-being and organizational resilience.

Positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and build lasting personal resources, mediating the relationship between compassion and work outcomes (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2013; Fredrickson et al., 2003). These resources, including resilience and self-efficacy, contribute to enhanced well-being and performance. We suggest that positive emotions, frequently elicited by compassionate leadership, mediate the relationship between compassion and various work outcomes, including resilience, engagement, and psychological well-being (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Positive emotions serve as coping mechanisms during adversity, promoting recovery and well-being (Fredrickson et al., 2003). They have organizational benefits, such as increased engagement and productivity.

Positive Emotions in Teacher Well-being and Performance

Positive emotions fostered by compassionate leadership enhance teacher resilience and reduce absenteeism, contributing to improved performance. Compassionate leaders create a supportive environment that promotes positive emotional experiences among teachers. Compassionate leadership is vital for fostering positive emotions among teachers, leading to improved well-being and performance. It plays a pivotal role in creating a positive work environment conducive to organizational success.

Trust in the Leader

Our study emphasizes the critical role of trust in leaders for organizational effectiveness, especially in the context of compassionate leadership. Research has consistently shown that interpersonal trust directly or indirectly influences various positive organizational outcomes, including individual job performance, organizational commitment, and team performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Kramer, 1999). Trust in a leader has been recognized as a fundamental factor in effective leadership (Bass, 1990). Mayer and colleagues (1995) “define trust as ‘the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party’” (p. 712).

Compassionate leaders foster trust by demonstrating care and consideration for their followers, which enhances followers' trust levels and willingness to collaborate for organizational success (Jung & Avolio, 2000). Consequently, followers feel more at ease and motivated to successfully complete tasks. Trust in a leader has been found to positively impact follower attitudes, including organizational commitment and job satisfaction, as well as behaviors such as job performance (Butler et al., 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1996).

Moreover, the study investigates the moderating role of trust in compassionate leadership. Even if a leader exhibits compassion, their effectiveness may be limited if followers do not

trust them (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Trust in the leader serves as a moderator between compassionate leadership behavior and desirable outcomes among followers. For example, trust in a school principal may influence the impact of their compassionate leadership on teachers' work attitudes and job performance. Thus, trust in leaders is crucial for the effectiveness of compassionate leadership, as it moderates the relationship between compassionate leadership behavior and desirable outcomes among followers in organizational contexts.

Impact of Compassionate Leadership on Teacher Work Attitudes

1. Resilience: Compassionate leadership of school principals significantly influences teachers' resilience by fostering positive emotions and self-efficacy (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Meneghel et al., 2016; Salanova et al., 2020). Teachers, when supported by compassionate leaders, are better equipped to bounce back from adversity and cope with challenges effectively, enhancing their overall resilience. This not only benefits teachers individually but also contributes to the resilience of the school community as a whole, especially during times of crisis.

2. Work Engagement: The compassionate leadership of school principals plays a crucial role in promoting teachers' work engagement by creating a supportive and encouraging work environment (Bakker et al., 2006). When teachers feel appreciated and valued by their leaders, they are more likely to exhibit vigor, dedication, and absorption in their work, leading to higher levels of engagement and productivity. Engaged teachers are not only more satisfied with their work but also contribute positively to the school's culture and effectiveness.

3. Psychological Well-being: Teachers' psychological well-being is significantly impacted by the compassionate leadership of school principals, especially during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic (Brackett et al., 2010; Košir et al., 2022). Compassionate leaders provide emotional support, empathy, and understanding, which help alleviate stress and promote overall well-being among teachers. Prioritizing teachers' psychological well-being is not only essential for their health and happiness but also directly impacts their ability to effectively teach and support students.

Impact of Compassionate Leadership on Job Performance

Compassionate leadership positively influences teachers' job performance by fostering positive emotions and self-efficacy (Frost, 1999; Dutton et al., 2002). When teachers feel supported and cared for by their principals, they are more motivated to perform at their best, resulting in improved job performance and ultimately benefiting students and the entire educational system. Schools led by compassionate principals are more likely to achieve higher levels of academic success and student well-being.

In summary, the key findings of the study shed light on the intricate dynamics between compassionate leadership and teacher well-being and performance. These findings include the influence of compassionate leadership on resilience, psychological well-being, work engagement, and job performance, mediated by both self-efficacy and positive emotions, and moderated by trust in the leader (Bandura, 1977; Fredrickson, 2013; Grant, 2008). Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of the dynamic relationship between compassionate leadership and teacher outcomes in educational settings, particularly during

times of crisis, providing valuable insights for both theory and practice in educational leadership.

These findings underscore the critical role of compassionate leadership in educational settings. Principals who prioritize compassion create environments where teachers feel valued, supported, and motivated to excel. By investing in the well-being and engagement of teachers, schools can enhance overall resilience, productivity, and performance. Additionally, during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, compassionate leadership becomes even more crucial in navigating challenges and maintaining the stability and effectiveness of the educational system.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive and cross-sectional design to investigate the impact of compassionate leadership on various outcomes among school teachers in India. The research targeted individual teachers as the unit of analysis, focusing specifically on those working under the leadership of school principals. The sampling frame consisted of teachers in India, and the study utilized convenience and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. These methods allowed for a broad and inclusive sample, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the research questions. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey method, which provided a systematic approach to gather quantitative data from a large sample. The final sample size comprised 496 teachers, offering a robust dataset for further statistical analyses.

Results and Discussion

Our findings indicate that compassionate leadership behavior exhibited by school principals significantly enhances teachers' self-efficacy. When principals demonstrate compassionate behaviors and are trusted by their teachers, it positively influences the teachers' beliefs in their ability to perform their roles effectively. The study suggests that trust strengthens the relationship between compassionate leadership and teacher self-efficacy, creating a synergistic effect. High levels of trust amplify the positive impact of compassionate leadership on self-efficacy. Moreover, self-efficacy mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and teacher resilience, with trust moderating this mediation. Consequently, compassionate leadership behavior indirectly contributes to teacher resilience by promoting self-efficacy among teachers. The study also shows that compassionate leadership behavior positively impacts the positive emotions experienced by teachers, with trust in the principal further enhancing these emotions. Our findings suggest that compassionate leadership indirectly fosters teacher resilience by enhancing positive emotions, with this indirect relationship being significant across all levels of trust.

Furthermore, the study indicates that compassionate leadership behavior indirectly enhances teachers' psychological well-being by fostering their self-efficacy. Principals who demonstrate compassionate leadership behaviors positively influence the self-efficacy of their teachers, which in turn contributes to the teachers' psychological well-being. This positive indirect effect is particularly significant when trust levels are moderate to high, indicating that trust plays a crucial role in enhancing the benefits of compassionate leadership on psychological well-being through self-efficacy. Furthermore, our findings suggest that positive emotions experienced by teachers significantly contribute to their psychological well-being. Teachers who experience more positive emotions tend to have better overall

psychological well-being. Compassionate leadership behavior indirectly influences psychological well-being by fostering positive emotions among teachers. Thus, principals who foster positive emotions among teachers contribute to their overall psychological well-being.

Moreover, our findings indicate that self-efficacy significantly influences work engagement among teachers. Teachers who feel competent and capable are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their work. The impact of compassionate leadership behavior on teachers' work engagement is indirect, mediated by self-efficacy. The level of trust that teachers have in their school principal moderates this relationship, with high levels of trust amplifying the positive impact of compassionate leadership on self-efficacy and, consequently, work engagement. The indirect effect of compassionate leadership on work engagement through self-efficacy is particularly significant when trust levels are moderate to high. The study suggests that compassionate leadership behavior does not directly impact teachers' work engagement. However, it indirectly influences work engagement through its positive effect on teachers' positive emotions. Higher levels of trust amplify the positive impact of compassionate leadership on work engagement by enhancing positive emotions.

Additionally, our findings show that self-efficacy has a significant positive impact on teachers' job performance. Compassionate leadership behavior influences job performance indirectly through its positive effect on teacher self-efficacy. Trust moderates this indirect relationship, with moderate to high levels of trust enhancing the positive impact of compassionate leadership on job performance via self-efficacy. Thus, the combination of compassionate leadership and trust leads to improved job performance through increased self-efficacy. Finally, the study suggests that compassionate leadership behavior indirectly affects job performance through positive emotions, indicating full mediation by the positive emotions of teachers. Trust also influences this indirect pathway through positive emotions. Higher levels of trust strengthen the positive relationship between compassionate leadership behavior and job performance via positive emotions, whereas lower levels of trust attenuate this relationship.

To summarise, this study integrated various theories to explore how compassionate leadership in school principals affects teachers' attitudes and performance via self-efficacy and positive emotions. It proposed a moderated mediation model to examine these effects, drawing from theories on trust, positive emotions, and self-efficacy. The findings indicate a direct link between compassionate leadership and teachers' attitudes and performance, with trust potentially moderating this relationship. Trust in the leader is crucial in influencing teachers' self-efficacy and positive emotions, thereby impacting their attitudes and performance. Overall, compassionate leadership is shown to enhance teacher attitudes and performance by fostering self-efficacy and positive emotions.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

Our study illustrates how compassionate leadership by school principals positively impacts teachers' attitudes and performance, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers valuable insights for educational institutions and organizational leaders, emphasizing the crucial role of compassion in nurturing resilience and enhancing job performance among teachers. Amidst adversity, such as the pandemic, compassionate leadership becomes even more vital in educational settings. Educational institutions can significantly benefit from implementing leadership development programs that emphasize the cultivation of

compassionate leadership skills among school principals. These programs should include training modules that focus on empathy-building, effective communication strategies, and fostering supportive relationships with teachers. By equipping school leaders with these skills, institutions can enhance the overall leadership quality within schools, leading to a more positive and productive educational environment. School leaders should also prioritize trust-building initiatives to enhance teachers' trust in their principals. This can be achieved through open communication, transparency in decision-making, and consistent support for teacher well-being. Such initiatives are crucial for building and strengthening the teacher-principal relationship, which in turn can lead to a more cohesive and collaborative school environment. Trust-building measures not only improve the relational dynamics within schools but also contribute to the overall effectiveness of leadership.

Moreover, schools should strive to create an organizational culture that values compassion, empathy, and trust. This can be accomplished through the implementation of policies that prioritize employee well-being, recognition programs that celebrate the achievements and efforts of staff, and collaborative decision-making processes that involve input from various stakeholders. By fostering a culture of compassion, schools can create a supportive and nurturing environment that enhances both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes. Finally, we urge school leaders to prioritize compassionate practices, recognizing their ability to foster resilience and well-being among teachers, thus creating a supportive work environment. In essence, our study highlights the mutual benefits of compassionate leadership for leaders and organizations. By compassionately responding to employee suffering, leaders enhance their effectiveness and inspire others to adopt compassionate approaches, fostering a culture of compassion and support within educational institutions and beyond.

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