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RESEARCH PAPER

COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DO ORGANISATIONS NEED MORE OF IT?

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people who generously gave their time to participate in focus groups, share their views of compassion in the workplace and support the development of the Compassion at Work Index (CWI).

- Michael Jenkins
- Helena Clayton
- Dan Lucy
- Andy Bradley
- Adrian Lock
- Ana Karakusevic
- Steve Hearsum
- Sue Binks

In particular, I would like to thank Michael Jenkins who initiated this project and provided valuable help and support in the course of this study. Also I am grateful to more than 500 people who took the time to respond to our survey and told us about their own level of compassion at work.

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Contents

Introduction 4
What is compassion? 5
Roffey Park's Compassion in the Workplace Model 6
What is compassionate leadership? 8
Is there a business case for compassionate leadership? 9
Concluding remarks 11
Appendix 1: Compassion study respondent profile 12
Appendix 2: Compassion at Work Index questions 14
References 15

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Introduction

If you search the phrase 'compassion at work' on the internet you will find numerous articles calling for more compassionate workplaces. It seems that although we know the value of compassion in our lives, we somehow manage to ignore it and find it difficult to be compassionate when we are at work. Some people may say that there is no place for personal issues at work. Others may think they are too busy to be compassionate or there are more important things in organisations to focus on than compassion. Noticing these things encouraged me to start working on this study and examine some of the common questions and doubts about compassion at work. Key questions that I will address in this article are:

- What is compassion?
- Why is compassion so scarce in organisational life?
- What is compassionate leadership?
- Is there a business case for compassion?

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What is compassion?

While I was working on this topic, I noticed that people generally find it difficult if not extremely challenging to describe compassion in tangible, specific terms. Dictionaries define compassion as feeling pity, mercy and sympathy. But being compassionate is far more than feeling sympathetic or being kind to someone. I define compassion as being moved by and feeling sorrow for another person's suffering and taking action to alleviate the pain felt by that person. This involves an authentic desire to help. Put simply, compassion is taking action to alleviate the sufferer's pain. In my opinion, taking action is the most important part of compassion and a key differentiator of a compassionate person from the rest. Rinpoche (1992) says:

> *"[Compassion] is not simply a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp recognition of their needs and pain, it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering".*

Compassion in the workplace could range from a dyadic act to a collective and organised act. Dyadic or individual compassion in the workplace is presented when an individual notices a colleague's problem, feels empathy and takes action to help. This form of compassion depends on the compassionate person's initiative to provide help and support and does not necessarily rely on any support from the organisation.

Compassion at work may also take a collective form. In this form of compassion a group of colleagues gets involved in the compassionate act. Kanov et al. (2004) identified this as 'organisational compassion' which begins with an individual noticing a colleague's problem, but becomes a social process with a group of colleagues acknowledging the presence of pain and feeling moved to take action in a collective way.

What triggers compassion?

To understand compassion better, we need to look at its triggers. Compassion is triggered by noticing someone who is suffering. Suffering is a broad term and it covers different types of unpleasant experiences that an individual goes through during a lifetime (e.g. loss or illness of a loved one, breakup of a romantic relationship or physical illness). It may be triggered due to an event in one's personal or work life. For example grief is one form of suffering that most of us experience at some point in our personal lives. In our work life we may suffer from bullying, harassment, unfair treatment at work, lack of job security or work-family conflicts. These all could be sources of psychological distress in individuals.

Why is compassion so scarce in organisational life?

During this study, I came across many articles claiming that there is simply insufficient compassion in organisations. The articles also reported that people find it difficult to be compassionate at work. Why might this be? A lack of compassion at work could be partly due to the pressure for performance, productivity and efficiency which reduces the capacity of employees to notice another person's suffering. When people are overloaded and overwhelmed, they are less able to respond in a compassionate way.

Another reason could be attributed to organisational culture. So for example, people may get the impression that compassionate behaviours are not acceptable or have no place at work. Fear of being seen as weak - or perhaps fear of burdening others - are some of the barriers to the sharing of pain. Some people fear that expressing their pain may affect the way they are viewed and ultimately jeopardise the future of their job. One of the people that I spoke with about this issue said:

> *"I truly believe that the culture of a business plays a vital part in whether being compassionate is a behaviour that is valued or not. Being compassionate can be seen as a 'weak' behaviour in business and as getting in the way of performance management. I wholeheartedly disagree with this premise and feel that one of the ways to turn around performance is to have regard for the other individual and understand where they are coming from in order to help them get to where they need to be. Compassion is often missing from business culture. Compassion is missing from the media, from politics and is rapidly declining in how we treat each other in society."*
>
> Head of Talent and Development, Private sector organisation

Some leaders fear that if they show compassion people might start taking them for granted, see them as a "soft touch" and take advantage of their compassion. An L&D consultant in the public sector said:

> *"I try to support people and I think it's important and fundamental to a positive working environment, but at the same time I have worked with some very disruptive people where their extreme emotional response was a deliberate strategy deployed to avoid dealing with important work issues or to manipulate or punish etc. Compassion isn't all about grand gestures: it's just as much about adjusting your strategies to meet individual needs."*
>
> Learning and development consultant, Public sector organisation

These are just some of the reasons why people might find it difficult to be compassionate at work.

Roffey Park's Compassion in the Workplace Model

We reviewed a wide range of literature on compassion to identify the attributes of a compassionate person. Roffey Park's Compassion in the Workplace model includes all the attributes that previous studies agreed on as well as attributes that we identified as relevant and necessary from our experience. Figure 1 represents the model.

To test the model, we conducted two focus groups with consultants at Roffey Park and generated a set of questions for each attribute. We also adapted some questions from previous studies (Davis, 1980; Pommier, 2010; Schieman et al., 2000; Sprecher et al., 2005) in compassion. We designed a survey based on the questions and collected 554 responses. Our respondents were employees from different sectors and different levels of management. Appendix 1 provides more detail about the profile of our respondents.

The survey results were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to explore the underlying constructs and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test whether the data fitted the model. The result of the analysis showed that the model meets the necessary criteria for being a robust model.

We used questions in the survey to develop a psychometric instrument to measure an individual's self-assessed level of compassion at work called Compassion at Work Index (CWI). We also developed a norm group based on the responses to the survey. Individuals who complete the CWI can compare their result with this norm group. They will also be able to download their individual report with some practical tips on how to improve or enhance the five attributes. The CWI is available at www.roffeypark.com/CWI .

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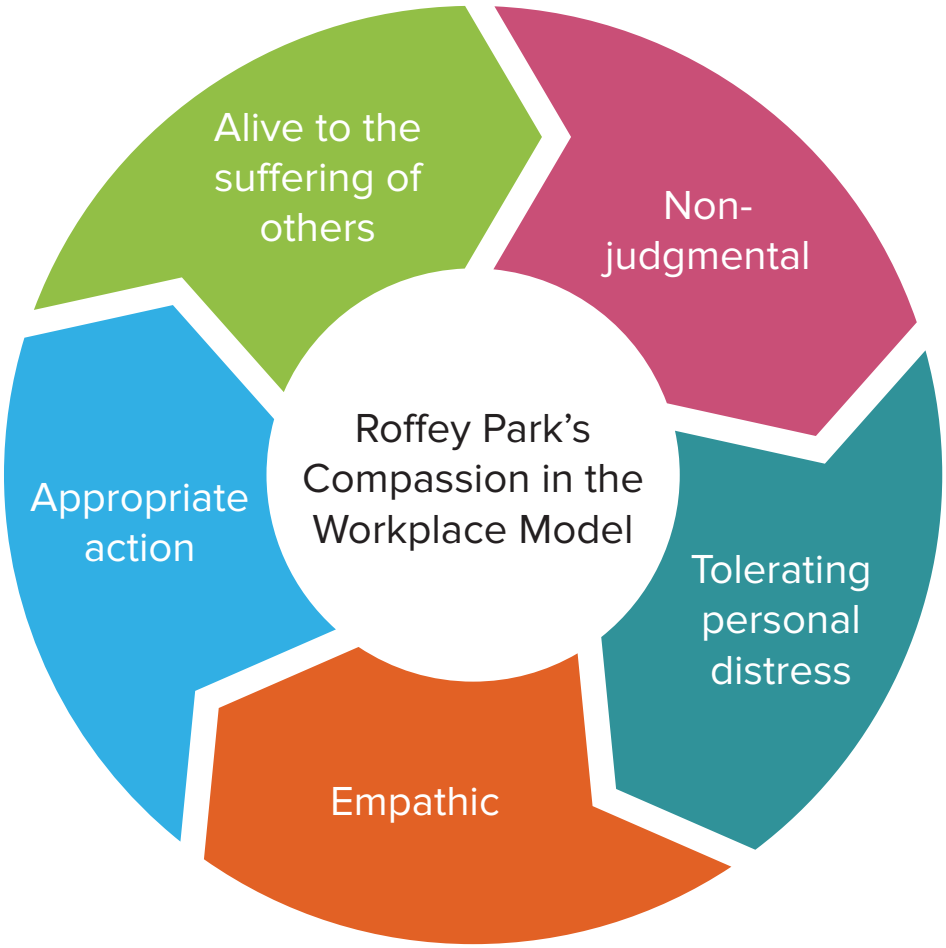

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Figure 1: Roffey Park's Compassion in the Workplace Model

BEING ALIVE TO THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS: Being sensitive to the well-being of others and noticing any change in their behaviour is one of the important attributes of a compassionate person. It enables the compassionate person to notice when others need help. Noticing someone's suffering could be difficult particularly in workplaces where people are busy with their work and preoccupied with their deadlines. Also depending on the work environment and the culture of the organisation, people may tend to hide their pain from others.

BEING NON-JUDGMENTAL: A compassionate person does not judge the sufferer and accepts and validates the person's experience. He or she recognises that the experience of a single individual is part of the larger human experience and it is not a separate event only happening to this person. Judging people in difficulty - or worse condemning them - is one of the obstacles preventing us from understanding their situation and thereby being able to feel their pain.

TOLERATING PERSONAL DISTRESS: Distress tolerance is the ability to bear or to hold difficult emotions. Hearing about or becoming aware of someone's difficulty may distress a compassionate person but does not overwhelm that person to the extent that it stops them from taking action. People who feel overwhelmed by another person's distress may simply turn away and may not be able to help or take the right action.

BEING EMPATHIC: Feeling the emotional pain of the person who is suffering is another attribute of a compassionate person. Empathy involves understanding the sufferer's pain and feeling it as if it were one's own.

TAKING APPROPRIATE ACTION: Feeling empathic towards someone encourages the observer to take action and to do something to help the sufferer. Customising actions depending on the sufferer's personal circumstances is also important. Taking the right action depends on the extent to which we have made efforts to know the sufferer.

What is compassionate leadership?

Compassionate leadership is more than just being a compassionate individual and caring for a colleague who is in pain. 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 problems and to provide support for one another. Compassionate leadership is about a) being a compassionate person and b) trying to create a culture whereby seeking or providing help to alleviate a sufferer's pain is not just acceptable but is seen as the norm.

Encouraging close relationships and familiarity between colleagues

Lilius et al (2011) suggests that leaders should reinforce values that encourage employees to establish strong relationships with each other, and to learn about each other's lives. Close contact with colleagues helps us to know how they typically behave and notice any changes in their behaviour. Establishing close relationships between team members can be made possible through shared physical spaces (e.g. open plan offices) as long as the space does not, paradoxically, create additional stresses by being over-crowded or excessively noisy. Another way of establishing a strong relationship between team members is through meeting or socialising with colleagues on a daily or weekly basis. This could happen through face to face conversations instead of emails, conversations at the water cooler, sharing a ride into work from home, eating together in the canteen or buying a sandwich to eat outside in the grounds of the organisation or a local park. Even having 'walking meetings' whereby colleagues go for a walk around the facility, rather than sitting in an office - could help with building strong relationships. This is a practice which can engender clearer, creative and innovative thinking too, as well as helping to nurture that feeling of closeness and familiarity.

Close relationships also help us to feel empathy for another and to know better what sort of act might be appropriate to helping that person cope with their distress.

Encouraging a compassionate response

Leaders can act as role models and support the compassion process by expressing care and concern towards their team members. They can also encourage a culture of openness by sharing their own problems, signalling that it is appropriate to talk about personal difficulties.

Towards a compassionate organisational culture

The questions contained in the panel below are based on studies by Kahn (1998), Lilius et al. (2011) and Dutton et al. (2006) and a focus group with consultants at Roffey Park. They are designed to help leaders to think about and then identify some of the activities they could consider adopting in order to foster compassion in their team and wider organisation.

Questions to help leaders identify some of the activities that foster compassion in their team and wider organisation:

1. Do I actively promote a culture in which people trust each other and know that if they talk about their problems, other team members will not judge them and they will listen and try to help?
2. Do I actively encourage and empower others to respond to a colleague's suffering?
3. Do I show care and concern towards people in my team?
4. Do I understand the value of sharing problems with others?
5. Do people in my team know that I will try to help them if they have a problem?
6. Are people in my team in regular close contact (e.g. through face to face daily or weekly department meetings)?
7. Is there a strong connection between people in my team which makes them feel joined, seen, felt, known and not alone?
8. When people in my team notice a change in the condition of a colleague, do they feel comfortable about inquiring further?
9. Is it a norm in my team to know about each other's lives and pay attention to the pain and suffering of a colleague?
10. Do people in my team feel safe in sharing their personal problems, issues and challenges with each other?
11. Do people in my team feel they can openly express their emotional pain?

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Is there a business case for compassionate leadership?

Compassion can often be thought of as 'fluffy' and not of relevance to business performance. Much of the research around compassion suggests otherwise. That said, being compassionate is not purely a case of business benefit, but what is humane and right.

> "
>
> When we are motivated by compassion and wisdom, the results of our actions benefit everyone, not just our individual selves or some immediate convenience.
>
> Dalai Lama

One might think that sufferers are the only ones who benefit from compassionate leadership. This is not true. The positive effect of compassionate leadership on people reaches way beyond the sufferers. Compassionate leadership has a clear influence on clients, employees who witness the compassion act and those who are involved in the actual act of compassion.

Benefits to the sufferer

The first group to benefit from compassionate leadership are sufferers. Compassion helps them to manage and move forward from their difficulties. Compassionate leadership enables the sufferer to openly express their loss and to share their painful experience. Emotional support, working flexibly and other forms of support can feature strongly as part of a compassionate response, helping the individual to get through the grieving process and enabling them to recover from their painful circumstances faster (Lilius et al. 2011).

Benefits to employees, their organisation and its clients

Compassion affects the relationship between the sufferer and the person who is providing the support in the following ways.

- Experiencing compassion at work connects co-workers psychologically and results in a stronger bond between them (Frost et al. 2000).
- Those who experience compassionate leadership at work are more likely to report affective commitment to their organisation and to talk about it in positive terms (Lilius et al. 2008).
- Supervisors who perceive that their organisation values their well-being are more likely to show supportive behaviour towards the people they manage (Eisenberger, 2006).
- Compassion breeds compassion. Individuals who provide compassion or those who are on the receiving end of it are not the only ones that benefit. Those who receive compassion are subsequently better able to direct their support and care giving to others (Goetz et al. 2010). This is critically important in caregiving organisations. Working in a compassionate caregiving organisation reduces the chance of compassion fatigue and burnout in caregivers (Figley 1995). This also provides them with the much needed emotional resources that they need to care for their clients (Lilius et al. 2011).

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- Studies also show that compassion improves the well-being and health of those who are involved in the act of compassion. A study by Dunn et al. (2008), demonstrates that the act of giving seems to be as pleasurable as the act of receiving. In Dunn's study, participants received a sum of money. Half of them were instructed to spend the money on themselves and the other half were asked to spend the money on others. Findings from the study showed that those who had spent their money on others felt significantly happier than those who had spent the money on themselves. Providing help to a colleague who is in need has the same positive impact and could in fact be even more rewarding.

- Compassionate leadership could influence employees' perception of their colleagues and organisations. Studies show that employees who believe that their leaders care about their well-being are more satisfied with their jobs and show higher organisational commitment (Lilius et al. 2011). An HR manager we spoke with told us:

  "We try to encourage "upstream" HR where we try to deal with issues early and with compassion. I have found this has business benefits. If you are kind and supportive when someone needs you most, they are more loyal and supportive to you and potentially the organisation."

  HR manager, Public sector

- Compassionate leadership and experiencing compassion at work strengthens the relationship between employees. This reduces employee turnover and increases organisational citizenship (Lilius et al. 2011). Appletree - a call centre organisation - provides a good example of how compassionate leadership can reduce staff turnover (Fryer 2013). In call centres, employee turnover can be high due to the nature of the work. Inspired by the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the CEO introduced a new initiative that allowed employees to express compassion to each other on a regular basis. As a result of this initiative, staff turnover in the organisation dropped by more than 60% in just six months (Fryer 2013).

- Studies (Fredrickson et al., 2000; Gross, 1994) show that experiencing positive emotions lowers heart rate and blood pressure. It also decreases employees' psychological distress. Therefore compassionate leadership can be seen as a way not only to improve employee wellbeing – it can also contribute positively to the lowering of the incidence of sick leave and absenteeism in organisations.

To summarise the key benefits of compassionate leadership:

- Compassionate leadership benefits sufferers, clients, employees (those who witness the compassion act and those who are involved in the actual act of compassion) and the organisation (Frost et al., 2000; Goetz et al., 2010; Lilius et al., 2011).

- Compassionate leadership sustains the sufferer through the grieving process and facilitates faster recovery (Lilius et al., 2011).

- Compassionate leadership improves employee engagement and retention (Fryer, 2013; Lilius et al., 2011).

- Compassionate leadership enables people to experience positive emotions which:
  - Boosts productivity (Lilius et al., 2011).
  - Lowers heart rate and blood pressure and strengthen the immune system (Friedrickson et al., 2000; Gross, 1994).
  - Results in positive customer service (Figley, 1995; Goetz et al., 2010).

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Concluding remarks

Most people agree that compassion is an important part of our lives and we need more compassion to help reduce suffering in the world. However few prioritise building compassion in the place where we spend a considerable part of our life. This motivated me to design the CWI and write this article and address some of the common questions about compassion in the workplace and compassionate leadership.

My intention in designing the CWI was to encourage people to pause and reflect on their own level of compassion at work. There are some practical tips that accompany the CWI report which could be used as a valuable resource to think how to improve or enhance the five attributes (alive to the suffering of others, non-judgmental, tolerating personal distress, empathy, appropriate action).

In writing this report, I took an evidence-based approach and gathered empirical evidence that demonstrates benefits of compassionate leadership not just to those experiencing difficulties, but beyond. Of course I acknowledge that compassion is a humane act and that should be sufficient for being compassionate at work. However, I hope that the empirical evidence that I have presented in this article will help engage a wider group of leaders and managers and provide them with a more convincing business case for compassionate leadership in their organisations.

To assess your own compassion at work, consider completing the CWI at:

www.roffeypark.com/cwi

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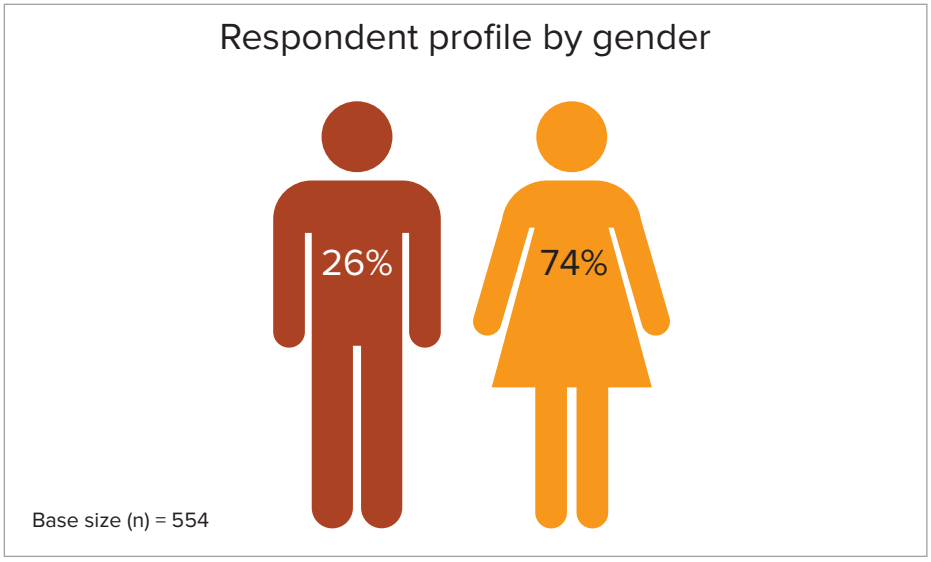
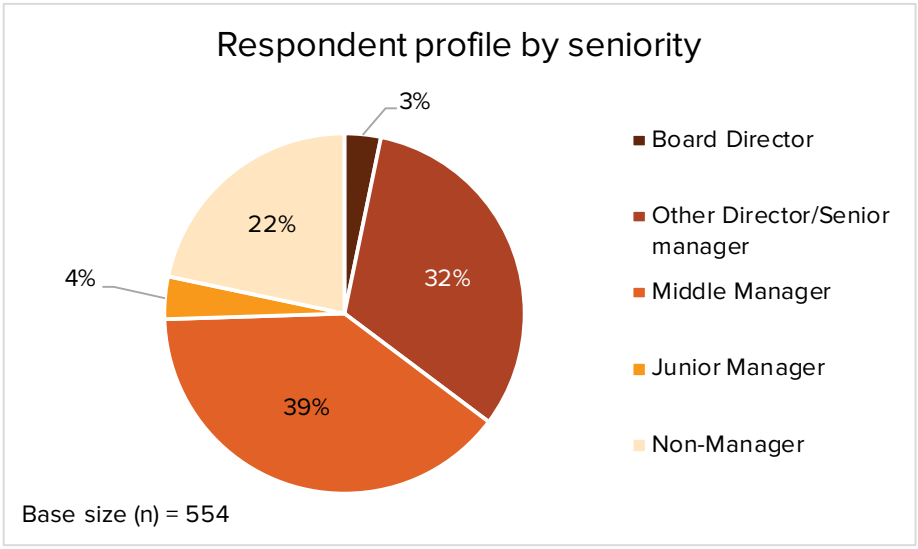
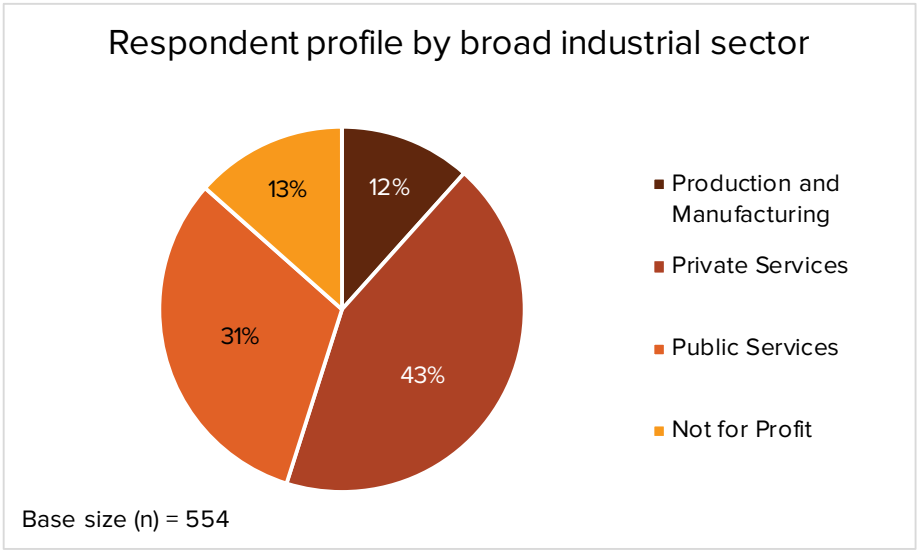
Appendix 1: Compassion study respondent profile







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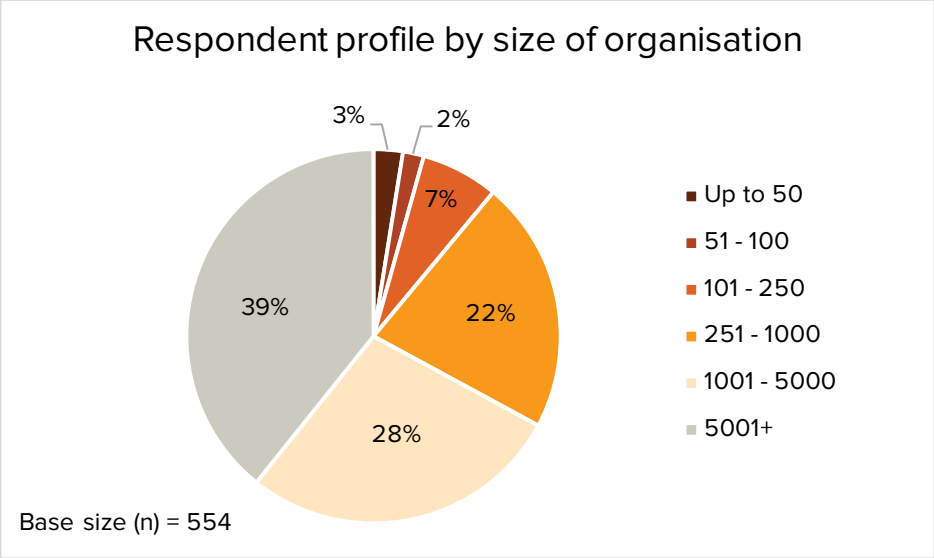

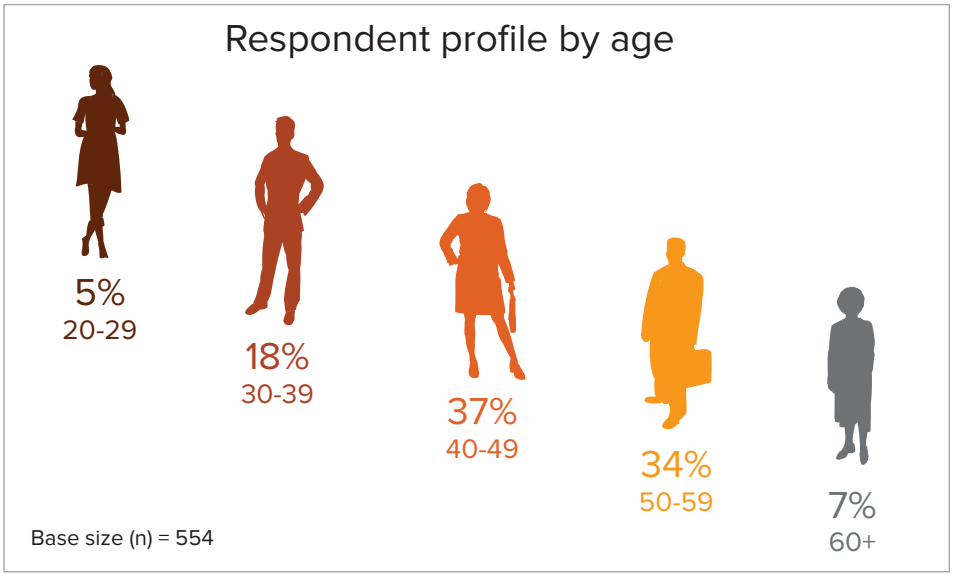

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Appendix 2: Compassion at Work Index questions

Please read each statement carefully and indicate how often you feel or behave in stated manner with your colleagues at your workplace (1= Almost never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always)

1. I notice when a colleague is upset, even if they don't say anything.
2. I'm good at noticing changes in colleagues' behaviour.
3. I notice colleagues who are in need of support.
4. I'm quick to notice when a colleague is distressed.
5. I am good at understanding how other colleagues feel.
6. I think colleagues bring problems on themselves.
7. I look down on other colleagues.
8. I think colleagues only have themselves to blame when they are in difficulty.
9. I think it is unprofessional when colleagues are unable to keep their personal problems out of the workplace.
10. I feel that other colleagues ought to take care of their own problems themselves.
11. When I hear about other colleagues' problems I feel overwhelmed.
12. When I see a colleague who badly needs help, I get stressed.
13. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
14. I feel emotionally connected to colleagues in pain.
15. It is easy for me to feel the emotional pain experienced by a colleague.
16. When I see a colleague feeling sad, I want to reach out to them.
17. Other colleagues' sorrows disturb me.
18. I can feel so deeply about a colleague's difficulties that they feel as if they are my own.
19. It upsets me when a colleague is troubled.
20. My heart goes out to colleagues who are unhappy.
21. I feel sorry for other colleagues when they are having problems.
22. I have tender feelings towards colleagues when they seem to be in need.
23. Before helping someone in need I carefully contemplate the course of action.
24. Before raising a difficult issue with a colleague, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in his/her place.

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Research at Roffey Park

Roffey Park funds its own research programme with the aim of meeting one of its charitable objectives: namely to conduct and publish research in support of the health and welfare of people at work. Our research improves the world of work and organisational performance by sharing knowledge of good practice in people management, leadership and organisational development.

Author's biography

Meysam Poorkavoos, Researcher
BSc, MSc, PhD

Meysam has a wealth of experience in the design, delivery and analysis of employee attitude and engagement surveys. He is also experienced in the design of 360 and psychometric instruments. He has recently developed two psychometric instruments: Resilience Capability Index (RCI) to measure personal resilience and Compassion at Work Index to measure individual level of compassion in the workplace. He has strong data analysis and modelling skills and has particular expertise in Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA).

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