



Compassionate Leadership for the Age of Radical Interconnectedness

Author: Sander G. Tideman

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us one important lesson: we are inherently interconnected with each other and with nature. Yet, witnessing the divisive political discourse, the anxiety and anger - all amplified by social media, it is this very lesson that we are finding so difficult to learn. We are reluctant to give up our “Me and Mine” thinking, putting our own fears, beliefs and identity above the acceptance of a more inclusive and interconnected perspective. In this chapter we will explore how, through the practice of compassionate leadership, we can find a way to transform these destructive tendencies into positive action.

Even before the pandemic we could witness significant disruptions to planetary health such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and social inequality, affecting our lives at all levels: our environment, our political structures, our economy, our communities, our sense of safety, health and well-being are all impacted.

The pandemic and its aftermath of social unrest and anger about social, economic, racial and political division, has altered people’s life to the core; many worry for their livelihood, yet at the same time we are forced to accept the utmost responsibility of someone’s else’s life. The reality of sick and dying people, families overloaded by care for kids, care-givers exhausted by constant demands, and continued loneliness and isolation of elderly people – evokes the need for a compassionate response to all those who suffer in this time.

The trouble is: *This severely clashes with the ‘I’ way of thinking, the tendency to regard ourselves as separate from others, the desire for instant gratification, our modern consumer culture.*

The Native Americans have a word for this “Wetiko”, which refers to the tendency to grasp for “Me & mine”, by denying our innate dependency on the interconnected web of life. Indigenous civilizations regard this as an illness of the modern mind.¹

The biologist E.O. Wilson said: “Only in the last moment in history, has the delusion arisen that people can flourish apart from the rest of the world.”² It is this “inner virus” that may bring humanity to the brink of extinction, through calamities such as pandemics, ideological wars and climate change.

*The biologist E.O. Wilson said:
“Only in the last moment in
history, has the delusion arisen
that people can flourish apart
from the rest of the world*

1 Levy, P. (2013), *Dispelling Wetiko, Breaking the Curse of Evil*. North Atlantic Books

2 Wilson, E.O (1979) *On Human Nature*, Harvard University Press



Now, the question is: what can we do about this? How can we overcome the illness of Wetico? The good news is that Covid-19 has both revealed the problem and the solution: we need to learn how to deal effectively with the interconnected nature of life. The world is not separate from us. Every choice we make, every product we purchase, every click and like we offer on social media shapes what the world is.

Obviously, denial, anxiety and blame don't work – they will only weaken the collective response that the crises are calling for. We cannot avoid living in the world, but we can choose *how to be* in the outside world. What relationship do we want to have with the world? This is where we have freedom and autonomy. How can we make the relationship with the world into a positive and constructive one? Our conclusion is: *the task of our civilization now is to learn to develop compassionate leadership.*

Benefits of compassion

The field of compassion science has surged in the past decade. Today, researchers are studying a myriad of powerful ways compassion practices can improve health and strengthen relationships. Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and motivates you to relieve that suffering.³

Researchers Christina Feldman and Willem Kuyken define it as follows: “Compassion is a multi-textured response to pain, sorrow and anguish. It includes kindness, empathy, generosity and acceptance. The strands of courage, tolerance, and equanimity are equally woven into the cloth of compassion. Above all compassion is the capacity to open to the reality of suffering and to aspire to its healing.”⁴

We will describe the science’s main discoveries.

Compassion includes empathy, but it is also much more. What is the difference between empathy and compassion? While empathy is the emotional response to another’s suffering, compassion is a motivation combining the empathic response with a *desire to act in order to help relieve that suffering*. Modern neuroscience has discovered that empathy and compassion generate distinct neurological responses in different parts of the brain.⁵ While empathy for the suffering of others triggers activity in the area of the brain associated with pain responses, compassion generates activity in the brain region associated with regulating emotions and prosocial reward response.⁶

Modern neuroscience has discovered that empathy and compassion generate distinct neurological responses in different parts of the brain.

3 Defined by Greater Good Center of Berkely University: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>

4 Feldman, C. and Kuyken, W. (2011) Compassion in the Landscape of Suffering. *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12, 143-155.

5 Kirschner H, Kuyken W, Wright K, Roberts H, Brejcha C, Karl A. (2019) Soothing Your Heart and Feeling Connected: A New Experimental Paradigm to Study the Benefits of Self-Compassion. *Clinical Psychological Science*;7(3):545-565

6 Singer T. & Klimecki O.M. Empathy and Compassion, in *Current Biology*, 22 September 2014

This distinction explains what is called ‘empathy fatigue’, typically manifesting in people working in caring professions.⁷ Empathy without the mustering the courage to act and address the causes of suffering leaves you vulnerable to overwhelm and depression.⁸ Thus, expanding empathy with the practice of compassion can avert empathy fatigue. Another drawback of empathy is that it can be twisted into contributing to xenophobia, the fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners, by strengthening the feelings for the “in-group” and weakening those for the “out-group” . A key insight centers on self-compassion, which is understood to be part and parcel of compassion practice.⁹ Self-compassion is a powerful, built-in coping mechanism we all have access to, says Kristin Neff, author of seminal work *The Mindful Self-Compassion*.¹⁰ There is ample research showing that whether you’re in combat or raising a special-needs child, dealing with cancer or going through a divorce, self-compassion gives you the strength to get through it,” Neff says. That’s because it has an effect on your physiology. When you practice compassion, such as through meditation, you stimulate your vagus nerve—which you can think of like a highway that sends messages to and from your brainstem and major organs, especially your heart.

Whether you’re on the giving or the receiving end, compassion has been shown to have profound and measurable effects, from reduced levels of stress and depression to faster healing from surgery. Emotions of anger, resentment, jealousy and frustration erode your immune system.¹¹

Cultivating compassionate leadership

There is more good news: compassionate leadership has been demonstrated by mankind before. In fact, many times in the history of civilizations have we faced and overcome difficult situations. It is in these conditions that the need arises for courageous and compassionate leadership. It is a call to courage and humanity that many of our ancestors have answered.

The myths passed on from these civilizations tell us something very important: that there are principles and practices in all traditions that can inform us how to take leadership in times of crises. These mythical narratives have been well described as “Hero’s Journeys” by Joseph Campbell.¹² We have built entire nations and civilizations on these models for leadership. For example, in ancient Greece Plato propagated the Philosopher-King in ancient Greece, the Chinese developed the concept of the *Sheng Huang* (sage ruler), in India rulers modeled themselves on the *Dharmaraja* (Dharma king) and the myth of the Shambhala kingdom, led by enlightened rulers, flourished in Central Asia.¹³

7 The term ‘emphatic disease’ was coined by Klimecke et al (2013) *Pathological Altruism*, New York

8 Tideman, Sander G. (2016) *Business as Instrument for Societal Change – In Conversation with the Dalai Lama*, Greenleaf Press

9 Salzberg, Sharon (2018) *Real Love: The Art of Mindful Connection*. Flatiron Books

10 Neff, Kirstin. Christopher Germer (2018) *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself. Build Inner Strength, and Thrive*. Guilford Press.

11 Jinpa, Thupten (2016), *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*. Avery Publishing Group.

12 Campbell, Joseph (1949) *The Hero with Thousands Faces*. Princeton University Press.

13 Trungpa, C. (1984) *Shambhala – the path of the sacred warrior*. Shambala Publications



In Buddhist civilizations these leaders are modeled on the Bodhisattva warrior, whose path to enlightenment is marked by his effort to create an enlightened society.¹⁴ The Bodhisattva is rooted in the realization that in essence there is no “separate self” to be found. We may have a sense of identity, but this is a conceptual construct with no basis in the biological reality of our organism. The independent self is like an illusion since in life there is nothing that is not interdependent. The more we grasp onto a fixed sense of self, and build up our ego, the more we will be disconnected from reality. Therefore, the Bodhisattva leader realizes that compassion is the best strategy for *being in reality* and thus achieving his own and others’ wellbeing.

These insights are not merely myths from bygone days: science has indicated that this benevolent leadership potential is innate to the human mind. As Albert Einstein remarked: “Human beings suffer from the optical delusion of separateness. In reality, we are deeply interconnected to all of life”. Importantly, science tells us how compassion can be defined and trained. The sources can be found in the new emerging science of the mind, which has developed at the crossroads between psychology, neuro-science, and the philosophy and practice of time-tested contemplative traditions.¹⁵

*As Albert Einstein remarked:
“Human beings suffer from
the optical delusion of
separateness. In reality, we are
deeply interconnected to all
of life”.*

Cultivating this type of leadership entails a form of learning that goes beyond the intellect, what is traditionally taught at school and university. Rather, it involves learning that cultivates *all human faculties*, including the somatic, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. While we are born with the seeds of wisdom and compassion, we can (and should) cultivate it to the level of developing the leadership that will create social, political and economic systems that serve collective human well-being, and preserve vital ecosystems for optimum resilience of all of life.¹⁶

As compassionate leaders, we *can* respond to the visceral cries for peace, justice, and common humanity. It’s time to bring our innate wisdom and the power of compassion to the forefront of leadership so that individuals, organizations, and systems can thrive before, during and after crises. Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter conclude from research on business leaders that: “91% (of leaders) said compassion is very important for leadership, and 80% would like to enhance their compassion but do not know how.”¹⁷

SEEDS-S Model

Bringing the main insights from the research together, we created a new comprehensive definition of compassionate leadership:

“Compassionate Leadership is the capacity to lead yourself, others and the environment (the larger system), from a motivation of (1) genuine care for the real needs of others (empathy), (2) the

14 Tideman, Sander G. (2016) *Gross National Happiness: Lessons for Sustainability Leadership*. South Asian Journal of Global Business Research 5(2):190-213

15 Wallace Alan B. (2006) *Contemplative Science- Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge*. Columbia University

16 Ricard, Matthieu (2015), *Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World*. Little Brown & Company

17 Hougaard, R., Carter, J., Chester L. (2018) *Power Can Corrupt Leaders. Compassion Can Save Them*. Harvard Business Review, February 2018 issue

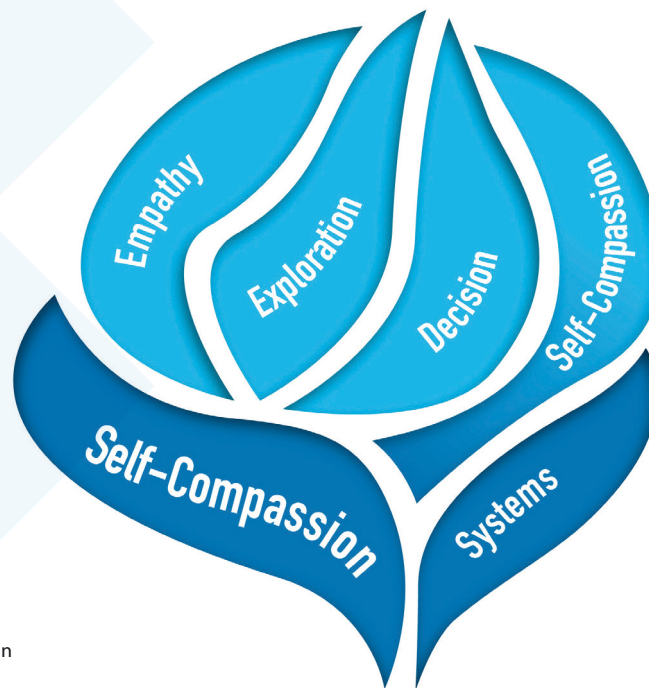


understanding of what causes these needs (wisdom), (3) a willingness to act to take away these causes (courage) and (4) to accept that if nothing can be done, you can continue to learn and grow your leadership capacity (self-compassion)."

We also created a practice of compassionate leadership expressed in the SEEDS-S model, which provides a step-by-step process of developing compassionate leadership.

SEEDS-S Model:

1. Self Compassion – Mindfulness/Emotional Balance
2. Empathy – Feeling the suffering of others
3. Explore – Analyzing causes of suffering
4. Decision – Decide to act / Motivation
5. Self-Compassion – Rejoice & Let go
6. Systems – Common humanity/Regular practice



SEEDS-S Model © S.G. Tideman

Step 1: Self-compassion

Whatever goal you have in life, you will need to realize that *you are the instrument* to reach the goal. There is no reason to think that in order to reach your goals, you will necessarily need to sacrifice your health and happiness. This is a misunderstanding. You have to take care of the instrument that you need to do the job. In fact, if you deplete your resources in pursuit of reaching your goals, you will be less likely to reach your goals. You will undermine yourself. If you want to create benefit, make sure that it comes from a place of strength, resourcefulness and joy – this will create results that can be sustained. This is the practice of self-compassion, which is about **resilience**. It is based on managing your emotional and physical balance, which determines your capacity to stay healthy and positive in spite of setbacks and challenges. Resilience comes from being attuned to your experience – being in touch with yourself.



Step 2: Empathy

Empathy starts by recognizing the suffering of another person, and *open your heart* to his situation. Here you activate your capacity to **feel empathy**, which is a natural emotion of human beings – technically known as the ‘open loop of the brain’.¹⁸ You try to step into the shoes of the other. What does it feel to be the other person in this particular situation and context of suffering? You can tune into the pain and suffering they might be feeling – while remaining centered in your self-compassion. From the viewpoint of biology, empathy is *a necessary emotional response* for our survival as a species, otherwise you would remain indifferent to the suffering of others, and indifference does not lead to action, only inaction. On the basis of the emotion of empathy induced by a shared sense of suffering you can develop a genuine sense of concern for the other.

Step 3: Exploration

After you have opened your heart, the next step is to open your mind. If you leave it as the experience the empathy, you run the risk of becoming demoralized and develop a state of hopelessness. This is not good for anyone. Therefore, in addition to being concerned, you should *use your intelligence*. This requires you to keep some distance from the problem that you observe and analyze this situation of suffering more closely. What are the causes and conditions? This is important to explore with an open and analytical mind. This exploration leads to **wisdom**.

Step 4: Decision

The next step is to ask yourself: what can you do to resolve the situation? This involves an element of **courage** because you develop the willingness to help those who suffer. *Focus on what you can do*. There are an unlimited number of things in the world that need changing, some big, and some small. Thankfully, we have a choice. We can focus on the things that are beyond our control to change *or* we can focus on where we can make a difference. If we cannot find anything we can do, we can still make a mental note: we can make a wish that the person finds a cure to his pain and suffering, that someday all the causes of his suffering will be alleviated.

Someone who has developed compassion to this level will not despair. Through his analysis and courage he will find a way to act appropriately. He cannot feel overwhelmed because he can use the problem as a means to develop his compassion and determine a way of action.

Step 5: Self-compassion

Now that you have made the right effort to overcome the suffering, or realized that nothing could be done, we can let go of the suffering and return to self-compassion. Perhaps you can rejoice that your effort has led to *increased courage* and *self-confidence*. In this way, the problem can become the source of your strength.

¹⁸ Goleman, Daniel (1996) *Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bloomsberry; Goleman, Daniel (2007). *Social Intelligence; The New Science of Human Performance*, Random House



Shantideva, a Buddhist philosopher, said: “when we face a problem, analyze the nature of the problem. If you find that the problem can be overcome, then there is no need to worry. On the other hand, if the problem cannot be overcome, then there is no use worrying. So in both cases, there is no cause for worry”.¹⁹

Step 6: Systems

It can be very hard to acknowledge that there always has been, is, and always will be suffering in the world. At the same time, and this may seem counter-intuitive, this insight can give peace of mind: when we are willing to acknowledge this shared aspect of the human condition, it can energize us to bring our compassion forward. Such reflection on our common humanity will alleviate our pain. We are not ‘alone’ in this experience. As Einstein said, we suffer from the ‘optical illusion of separateness’, but in reality we are deeply interconnected with all of life. And the more we will practice compassion, the more we realize the truth of this. In *Biology of Love*, biologist Humberto Maturana writes: “Love is our natural condition, and it is the denial of love what requires all our rational efforts, but what for, when life is so much better in love than in aggression?”²⁰

*Humberto Maturana writes:
“Love is our natural condition,
and it is the denial of love
what requires all our rational
efforts, but what for, when life
is so much better in love than
in aggression?”*

With this six-step practice we can develop compassionate leadership. This may be the best antidote to the “Me and Mine” virus that is so endemic in our thinking at this time, and help humanity to overcome the grand challenges that we are facing.



The article appeared as a chapter in the book: *Transatlantic Dialogue ‘Liber memorialis’*, published by University of Luxembourg on May 26, 2021.

Author: Sander Tideman is specialized in leadership development for sustainable change. He is Executive Director of Garrison Institute International and serves on the faculty of Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, and Mobius Executive Leadership in Boston. He is co-founder of the European Platform for Compassionate Leadership.

For more information on Compassionate Leadership, please contact info@garrisoninstitute-int.org. Garrison Institute International offers learning programs on cultivating compassion in leadership, teams and organizations, for more effective, resilient and compassionate organizations.

¹⁹ Shantideva (1997). *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (V.A. Wallace, & B.A. Wallace, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.

²⁰ Humberto Maturana & Gerda Verden-Zoller (1996) *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. Edited by Pille Bunnell, Imprint Academic 2008