

At the Helm in the Storm: Compassionate Leadership for Library Instruction Programs

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Jean Pillement, *A Shipwreck in a Storm*. 1782. Pastel on gessoed canvas. [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), New York.

Introductions

- Mallory Jallas at the University of Illinois Springfield.
- Clint Baugess at Oberlin College & Conservatory.

Mallory Jallas

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Head of Information Literacy and Academic Outreach



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We are former colleagues, who have both served as instruction coordinators in college and university library settings. In the last two years, we have also both transitioned into roles at new institutions that carry instruction coordinator responsibilities.

However, at the University of Illinois Springfield, Mallory has formal management responsibilities, while Clint at Oberlin College does not and supports instruction through a community of practice that unites librarians and staff across campus libraries.

Growing Interest in Workplace Compassion



- While discussing our roles and how to get the “work” of instruction done, we began discussing **compassionate leadership** – a leadership style that generally aligns in many ways with how we both view leadership and has become more visible since 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic because of its focus on care, empathy, and alleviating suffering in the workplace. Thinking not just about getting work done, but *how* it gets done.
- In recent years, there have been many book publications that touch upon the roles of empathy and compassion, or focus explicitly on different configurations of the compassionate leadership style, largely within healthcare, K-12 education, and business.
- Certainly this interest should come as no surprise. As higher education and our society experience significant disruption and change, there is no shortage of suffering in library organizations and the lives of library workers, including anxiety, stress, and burnout. Although libraries are aligned with other service professions like healthcare, compassionate leadership is understudied in libraries except in upper administration.
- Our presentation today is an invitation to you into our conversation **about compassionate leadership** in libraries as we all experience significant change and disruption, **how it may assist** as an approach for leading information literacy programs as a coordinator, with or without formal managerial responsibilities, **and where it may work well** or fall short as a single leadership style.

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	11:15 am-12:05 pm
	1. Defining compassionate leadership
	2. Practices and behaviors
	3. Instruction coordinator role
	4. Scenarios
	5. Limitations

For our conversation, we will move through 5 main areas:

1. Defining our terms: including empathy, compassion, and compassionate leadership
2. Identifying the compassionate leadership's common practices and behaviors
3. Outlining the instruction coordinator role within library organizations
4. Exploring library-based scenarios to put compassionate leadership into practice
5. Considering limitations and areas where compassion leadership alone may fall short

Compassion in the Workplace

Suffering

In the workplace, suffering can take many forms:

- events in personal life
- from the workplace itself
- caring for others as part of role

It may not always be severe or overt:

- financial resources
- expectations of overtime, etc.
- being tasked with making difficult decisions

Compassion

"...noticing another person's suffering, empathetically feeling another person's pain, and **acting in a manner to ease the suffering**" (Lilius et al., 2008, pp. 194-95).

Empathy + action = Compassion



Empathy vs. Compassion

"The two terms differ in that **empathy is an emotion, and compassion is an intention**. Empathy is when we see someone suffer, take on the suffering they experience, and suffer together with them. ...Compassion is to take a step away from empathy and ask ourselves what we can do to support the person who is suffering" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 55).

There is a significant body of research on compassion within the workplace and the many benefits it has for those sharing compassion, receiving it, or observing it. For instance, employees may feel: legitimized, more satisfied in their jobs, experience positive emotions at work, reciprocate compassion to others; and feel more loyalty and connection to their organization—all of which increase performance for the organization *and* improve the well-being and health of staff (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Lilius et al., 2012).

Suffering in work organizations can take many forms— events in an employee's personal life (death, breakup, illness or chronic pain, mental health challenges), from the workplace itself (job stress, a toxic work environment, bullying, harassment, etc.), or caring for others as part of the work role (Lilius et al., 2012). The suffering may not always be severe or overt; it could include constrained financial resources, being expected to work overtime, or making difficult personnel decisions (Shuck et al., 2019).

Compassion itself has come to be defined in the literature as, "...noticing another person's suffering, empathetically feeling another person's pain, and acting in a manner to ease the suffering" (Lilius et al., 2008, pp.194-95).

The key piece of this definition that's most relevant to compassionate leadership is not only seeing and empathizing with suffering but **taking action** to ease that suffering.

As Hougaard and Carter (2022) clarify:

"The two terms differ in that empathy is an emotion, and compassion is an

intention. Empathy is when we see someone suffer, take on the suffering they experience, and suffer together with them. ...Compassion is to take a step away from empathy and ask ourselves what we can do to support the person who is suffering” (p. 55).

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- Hougaard, R., & Carter, J. (2022). *Compassionate leadership: How to do hard things in a human way*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lilius, J. M., Kanov, J., Dutton, J. E., Worline, M. C., & Maitlis, S. (2012). Compassion revealed: What we know about compassion at work (and where we need to know more). In *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734610.013.0021>
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Compassionate Leadership

What is it?

"Doing hard things in a human way" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 1).

"Involves recognizing and addressing staff members' needs and challenges, promoting support, and fostering a collaborative atmosphere" (Jones, 2026, p. 167).

"The practice of using your head and heart to inspire and influence people so they can, in turn, inspire and influence others" (Donellan, 2023).

Compassionate leaders, "build compassionate cultures through frequent communication, transparent decision-making, fairness, feedback, and accountability" (Cox, 2023, p. 564).

Related leadership styles:

- Authentic Leadership
- Servant Leadership
- Inclusive Leadership

Compassionate Leaders...

- Know themselves
- Understand others
- Engage with others in positive and courageous ways

So, what is compassionate leadership then?

- "Doing hard things in a human way" - Hougaard & Carter
- "Involves recognizing and addressing staff members' needs and challenges, promoting support, and fostering a collaborative atmosphere" - Jones
- "The practice of using your head and heart to inspire and influence people so they can, in turn, inspire and influence others." - Donellan
- Leadership that relies on the leader knowing themselves and using their strengths and weaknesses to be both authentic and vulnerable. Compassionate leaders use strategies like active listening, appreciation, and recognition to connect with others. They "build compassionate cultures through frequent communication, transparent decision-making, fairness, feedback, and accountability." - Cox

There are some trends among these different definitions - human-centered decision making that balances results with care for people. Compassion is not avoidance of difficulty, but rather how difficulty is handled. There is also a common need for recognition of needs and challenges - this is relational, attentive, and situational, not generic. Finally, these definitions reinforce that compassionate leadership extends beyond the individual and creates a positive contribution to the overall organizational culture.

As a leadership style, compassionate leadership shares some similar characteristics with other leadership styles:

- Authentic leadership: is a relationship-driven approach where core values of

- vulnerability and trust build and foster engagement
- Servant leadership: Leaders serve employees, prioritizing the employees' growth, well-being, and empowerment.
- Inclusive leadership: According to Jones, inclusive leadership goes beyond fostering individual well-being and actively works to dismantle systemic inequities, promote equity, and ensure all team members feel a sense of belonging (p. 167)

According to Cox, successful compassionate leaders know themselves, understand others, and engage with others in positive and courageous ways (2023, p 558). These sentiments might feel somewhat broad, but Cox and others have expanded the literature by providing some more specificity about the traits of compassionate leadership, and we will explore those next.

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Compassionate Leadership Traits



To further explore what compassionate leadership is, it will be helpful to understand more completely what these folks do well.

- **Authenticity and vulnerability** are cornerstones of the compassionate leader. In order to understand the folks we lead, we need to begin with ourselves. It is vital to bring your whole self into the role so you can authentically engage on an equal level with those you are working with. This authenticity will help establish and grow trust. Vulnerability is crucial for similar reasons, and it really enables authentic connection. Without vulnerability, compassion remains performative rather than relational.
- **Active listening and presence**, both at the core, allow you to better understand others. Active listening requires that you stay focused, ask questions, and confirm understanding. Being curious can go a long way to support active listening. Presence requires staying attuned to people and the situations unfolding. The compassionate leader uses presence as a strategy to be there for people, manifesting their care and concern.
- A **practice of appreciation** can help affirm people's worth and translate compassion into visible action. It recognizes that people are whole individuals and can highlight their effort, intention, and contribution, rather than focusing solely on outcomes. When appreciation is part of the culture, feedback becomes safer, and people are more open to learning and improvement when they feel valued rather than judged.
- **Transparency and communication** go hand in hand - communication is telling people what is going on, and transparency is explaining why it is going on. Being clear in communication and transparent in your decision-making builds trust, fosters psychological safety, and creates a positive environment for all.

- While some leaders may shy away from **dissent**, or in extreme cases even **dialogue**, it can be a critical indicator that folks feel safe enough to disagree and have the confidence to share their opinions. There are strategies like actively engaging with questions that draw out dissenting opinions in discussion, or creating an anonymous space for feedback to be shared, that can help with this. An important final step for engaging dialogue and dissent is to follow up and praise folks who offer those perspectives. This helps people feel more comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.
- Lastly, and maybe most importantly, is **courage**. Courage requires us to be willing to get out of our comfort zone. It is often mistaken for fearlessness, but that is not accurate; we can still experience fear, dread, or concern.

Instruction Coordinators

"Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians" (ACRL, 2017)

"...**leads, develops, and maintains** a library and/or institution's information literacy program. This role requires **highly effective organizational and communication skills in managing multiple simultaneous projects**, events, resources, assessment, statistical reporting, and **coordinating** with administrators as well as academic departments."

Strengths

Coordinators are responsible for assessing and evaluating impact, identifying program gaps, leading and mentoring, collaborating and communicating, and being strategic and programmatic.

- **collaborates** effectively and diplomatically
- **encourages, leads, and empowers**
- **creates and cultivates**
- assumes responsibility

When it comes to library instruction programs, there is no single structure common to all libraries. Instruction librarians may be part of a larger department, exist in a small 2-3 person team, exist in a department entirely focused on supporting teaching and learning, or be entirely on their own.

According to ACRL's 2017 document, "Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians," a coordinator:

"leads, develops, and maintains a library and/or institution's information literacy program. This role requires highly effective organizational and communication skills in managing multiple simultaneous projects, events, resources, assessment, statistical reporting, and coordinating with administrators as well as academic departments."

Coordinators are responsible for assessing and evaluating impact, identifying program gaps, leading and mentoring, collaborating and communicating, and being strategic and programmatic. ACRL provides an inventory of related seven bulleted strengths that begin with words and phrases like:

"collaborates effectively and diplomatically," "encourages, leads, and empowers," "creates and cultivates," and "assumes responsibility." In short, there is a significant focus on mentoring, supporting, and collaborating.

Essential for our conversation today, an instruction program coordinator will be responsible for the success of the instruction program, but may or may not have a formal supervisory role and directly manage or supervise colleagues providing instruction.

As Arellano Douglas and Gadsby note in their 2019 *In the Library with the Leadpipe* piece, this relational work described earlier of mentoring, collaborating, and supporting is often coded as feminine in a gendered workplace and undervalued.

Although instruction coordinators may hold accountability for the success of an instruction program, they, as mentioned, often lack supervisory authority. As a result, “instruction coordinators supervise programs, not people,” and must work relationally with others for the instruction program’s success.

They carry the responsibility of leadership but may not reap its rewards, such as recognition, career advancement, or additional compensation. This mismatch or incompatibility between the work being done and the position as described can easily lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout – in short, suffering.

Citations

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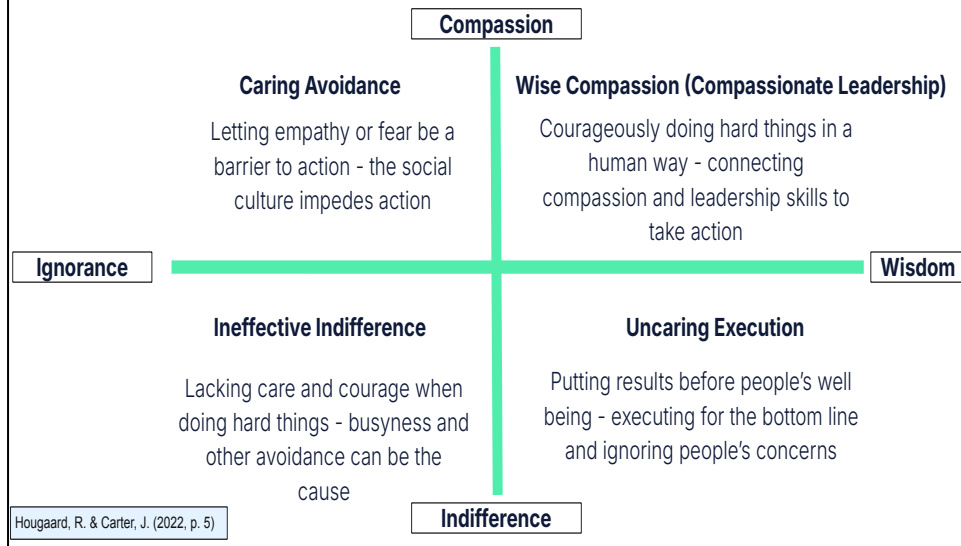
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Wise Compassion Matrix



For our scenarios, we're going to adapt a matrix created by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter in their 2022 book, *Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things the Human Way*. It provides a useful way for us to visualize compassion leadership, or "wise compassion," as they refer to it, alongside other ways to respond to each scenario.

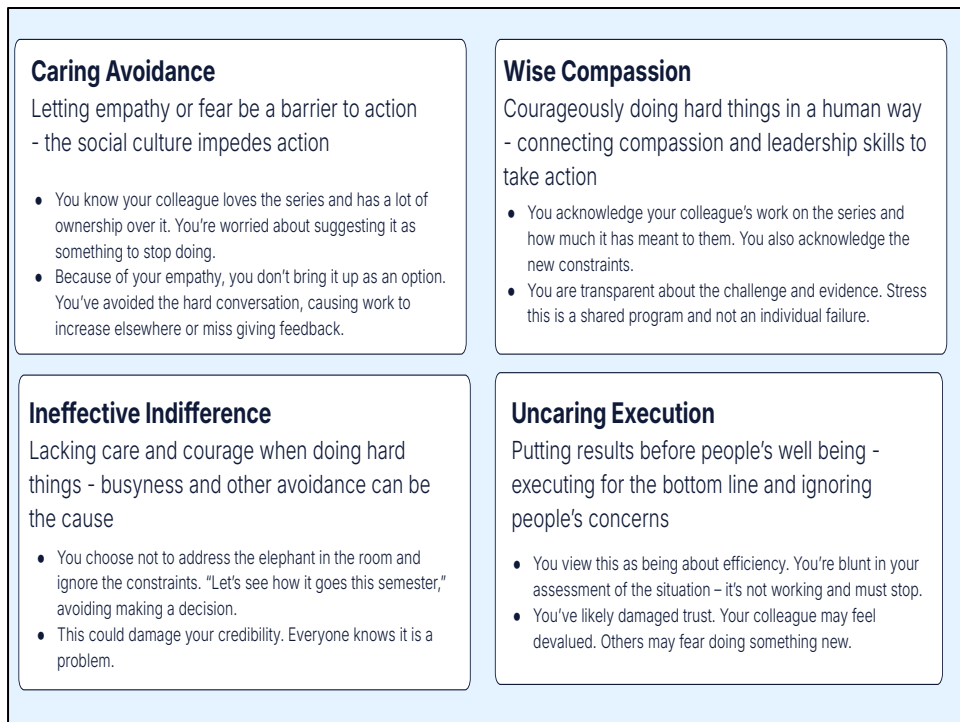
Scenario 1: What can we stop doing?

A team of 6 instruction librarians has been cut in half as a result of retirements and staffing reductions.

Knowing that the team can't do all the things it used to do, you want to lead a conversation to identify what's essential to keep doing, what could be done differently, and **what the team wants to pause or no longer do.**

You have a **colleague who loves running a workshop series.** The series requires a lot of time to prepare and run, and, unfortunately, **attendance has flatlined for them.**

Scenario: A team of 6 instruction librarians has been cut in half as a result of retirements and staffing reductions. Knowing that the team can't do all the things it used to do, you want to lead a conversation to identify what's essential to keep doing, what could be done differently with reduced staff, and what we may want to decide to pause or no longer do. You have a staff member who loves running a workshop series. They require a lot of time to prepare and run, and, unfortunately, attendance has flatlined for them.



Quadrant 1: Caring Avoidance

You know your colleague loves doing the workshop series. It's something they developed and have a lot of ownership over. You're empathetic and worried about suggesting this is something that we may want to stop doing.

Because of your empathy, you avoid sharing feedback about the workshop or doing the difficult thing of suggesting it may no longer meet the needs or be feasible for fear it may hurt your colleague. You've avoided a hard conversation, causing workload to increase elsewhere. This may build resentment from everyone else, and you've denied your colleague the opportunity to get accurate feedback and develop in other areas.

Quadrant 2: Ineffective indifference

You choose not to address the elephant in the room—the evidence indicating this isn't working like it used to and you ignore the constraints. "Let's see how this goes this semester," avoiding making a decision.

Your lack of honesty and clarity has the potential to damage your credibility. Your colleagues know it's a problem, and you've avoided it for fear of upsetting your colleague.

Quadrant 3: Uncaring Execution

You view this entirely from ROI and efficiency. It's not working and takes a lot of time, not acknowledging or empathizing with your colleague who has developed it. You're blunt in your assessment of the situation.

You've likely damaged trust and psychological safety. Your colleague may feel devalued, and others may be less likely to be creative and try something new for fear it won't be valued if it's not successful.

Quadrant 4: Wise Compassion

You acknowledge your colleague's work on building the series in the past and acknowledge how much it has meant to them. You also acknowledge the existing constraints and the reduced attendance in recent years.

You are transparent about the constraints and candid about the evidence. Stress this is a shared problem across everything you're doing, not an individual failure.

Scenario 2: Uneven teaching

You are finalizing your annual instruction report and realize that **your colleague has taught 3x the number of courses as everyone in your department**. From your bi-weekly check-ins, you knew they were teaching a lot this semester, but you hadn't realized the exact scale of their workload. They didn't voice any concerns about the instruction load. You have other colleagues in your instruction program who have very low numbers this year, and a newer colleague who is still trying to find their footing in their subject areas. **The stats you've gathered highlight this disparity**. Your Dean is happy with the increased instruction numbers for their annual report to upper administration, but you want to ensure you are supporting your colleagues without endorsing practices that can lead to burnout.

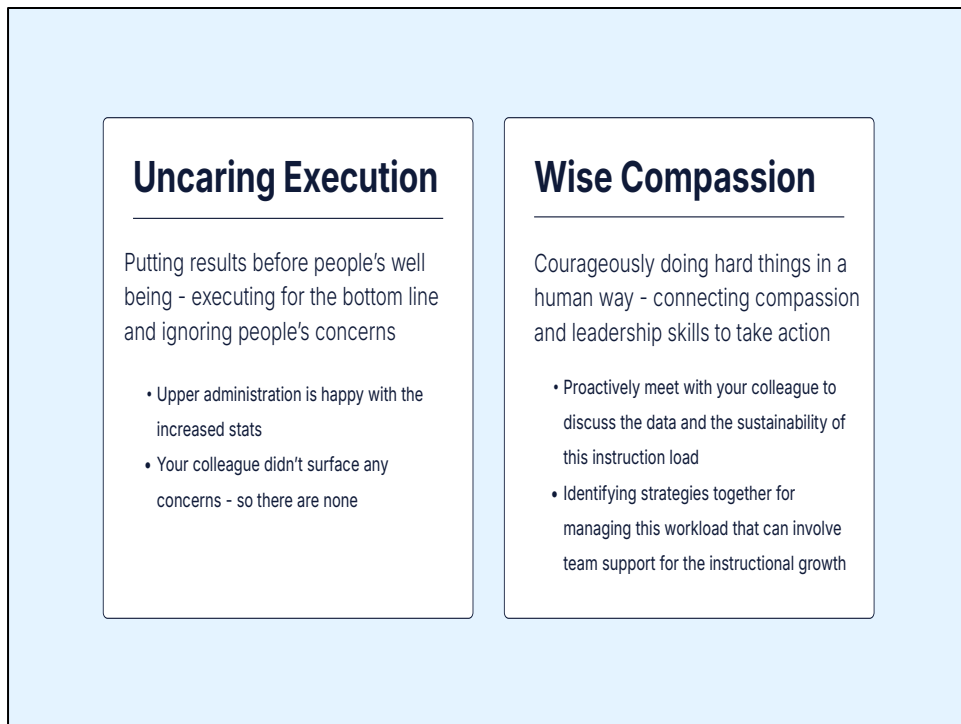
Uncaring Execution

Your Dean is pleased with the growth in instruction this year and wants you to do your best to keep this trend growing. At your next department meeting, you share the feedback and discuss how you can continue the growth next year.

How can you move closer to wise compassion in this scenario?

Keep your positionality in mind.

Scenario: You are finalizing your annual instruction report and realize that your colleague has taught 3x the number of courses as everyone in your department. From your bi-weekly check-ins, you knew they were teaching a lot this semester, but you hadn't realized the exact scale of their workload. They didn't voice any concerns about the instruction load. You have other colleagues in your instruction program who have very low numbers this year, and a newer colleague who is still trying to find their footing in their subject areas. The stats you've gathered highlight this disparity. Your Dean is happy with the increased instruction numbers for their annual report to upper administration, but you want to ensure you are supporting your colleagues without endorsing practices that can lead to burnout.



Quadrant to explore: Uncaring execution- Your Dean is pleased with the growth in instruction this year and wants you to do your best to keep this trend growing. At your next department meeting, you share the feedback and discuss how you can continue the growth next year.

How can we move closer to wise compassion in this situation? Reflect and chat with a partner if you would like, briefly. Keep your positionality in mind as you discuss your strategy.

What did you all come up with?

Some ideas from us for moving towards wise compassion:

- Proactively meet with your colleague to discuss the data and the sustainability of this instruction load
- Identifying strategies together for managing this workload that can involve team support for the instructional growth

Scenario 3: Giving Feedback

As the Information Literacy Coordinator, you get some feedback via your yearly faculty assessment survey that a colleague's instruction sessions are not meeting shared expectations. There are open comments that the learning goals are unclear, that student engagement was low, and that faculty noted limited impact in the final papers students turned in. You note these findings and consider how to address them with your colleague.

Caring Avoidance

As you examine the feedback from your faculty survey, you start to have some concerns about bringing this up with your colleague. They've had a tough year, with many personal tribulations. The faculty member who supplied the feedback also has a reputation for being very demanding. You decide to wait another semester to see if the issue resolves on its own.

How can you move closer to wise compassion in this scenario?

Keep your positionality in mind.

Scenario: As the Information Literacy Coordinator, you get some feedback via your yearly faculty assessment survey that a colleague's instruction sessions are not meeting shared expectations. There are open comments that the learning goals are unclear, that student engagement was low, and that faculty noted limited impact in the final papers students turned in. You note these findings and consider how to address them with your colleague.



Quadrant to explore: Caring Avoidance- As you examine the feedback from your faculty survey, you start to have some concerns about bringing this up with your colleague. They've had a tough year, with many personal tribulations. The faculty member who supplied the feedback also has a reputation for being very demanding. You decide to wait another semester to see if the issue resolves on its own.

How can we move closer to wise compassion in this situation? Reflect and chat with a partner if you would like, briefly. Keep your positionality in mind as you discuss your strategy.

What did you all come up with?

Some ideas from us for moving towards wise compassion:

- You gather more information about specific observations and contextual factors
- You set a meeting to discuss the feedback and provide an agenda with points for your colleague to reflect on beforehand.
- You co-create a plan for next steps and performance improvement that includes clear follow-up

Scenario 4: Assessment

Your director has **tasked you with improving assessment practices in the instruction program**. You do have good data about the number of classes, their course levels, and even the time spent preparing for them. However, when it comes to learning assessment, six different librarians do library instruction, and **individual assessment practices vary widely**. Two people have integrated assessments into one-shot instruction, others have rubric-based assessments of class papers, and others aren't formally assessing learning but assure you the vibes are good in class and faculty seem happy.

Ineffective Indifference

- You share what the director has asked of everyone. After an initial conversation, a colleague volunteers to draft a common assessment to use in classes. Most people use it, but a few never do.
- You have a lot to do, and you choose not to press the issue and just share the data you do get in your annual report.

How can you move closer to wise compassion in this scenario?

Keep your positionality in mind.

Scenario: Your director has **tasked you with improving assessment practices in the instruction program**. You do have good data about the number of classes, their course levels, and even the time spent preparing for them. However, when it comes to learning assessment, six different librarians do library instruction, and **individual assessment practices vary widely**. Two people have integrated assessments into one-shot instruction, others have rubric-based assessments of class papers, and others aren't formally assessing learning but assure you the vibes are good in class and faculty seem happy.



Quadrant to explore: Ineffective Indifference- You share what the director has asked of everyone. After an initial conversation, a colleague volunteers to draft a common assessment to use in classes. Most people use it, but a few never do. You have a lot to do, and you choose not to press the issue and just share the data you do get in your annual report.

How can we move closer to wise compassion in this situation? Reflect and chat with a partner if you would like, briefly. Keep your positionality in mind as you discuss your strategy.

What did you all come up with?

Some ideas from us for moving towards wise compassion:

- Meet 1-on-1 with the folks who didn't participate. Ask what prevents them from contributing (time, faculty collaborations, etc.). Listen, acknowledge their challenges and work together to identify a way for them to contribute even with legitimate constraints.
- Review the assessment results together and identify ways to improve student learning. Try to move the culture from compliance to collective practice to support student learning. Acknowledge the data gap and discuss strategies to integrate assessment into class to get more data next round.

Limitations

Systemic Issues

Not a panacea for toxic workplace culture, especially at a department or coordinator level.

Institutional response is needed

Cultural Differences

Be attentive to different cultural norms of compassion

Individuals will have personal preferences

(Shuck, et al., 2019)

Compassion Fatigue

Emotional strain that results from prolonged exposure to suffering

Address with proper training, support systems, and self-care practices

(Newman, B. L., 2025, p. xvi)

Compassionate leadership is one of many available leadership styles, which often share commonalities. While we are drawn to compassionate leadership for its focus on taking action to alleviate suffering in the workplace (for both the employee and leader), we note some ways in which it may not be enough on its own.

Suffering from Systemic Issues:

While we see the benefits to both the leader and employees, this approach may fall flat when leaders are reporting to others within the library or college/university who take a different approach and have created a toxic workplace with contrasting behaviors, such as abuse, bullying, disrespect, exclusion, or poor communication and transparency. We see limits to what an individual leader, with official managerial responsibilities or not, may be able to do to alleviate workplace suffering in a toxic environment. Institutional responses may be essential.

Cultural Differences:

Although the practice of compassion holds value across diverse cultures, scholars like Brad Shuck and his colleagues (2019) warn that experiences of compassion may differ by culture, and you will want to be attentive to different cultural norms of compassion.

For example, although publicly recognizing staff accomplishments may be appreciated by some people, for others they could experience pain or discomfort. Likewise, for some forms of personal suffering, be aware that any public acknowledgement may be deeply uncomfortable for the recipient or involve additional emotional labor for others in support of a colleague.

Compassion Fatigue:

In Newman's 2025 book, *Well-being in the Library Workplace: A Handbook for Managers*, the editor Newman outlines in the introduction why a handbook for managers about well-being is so needed at this time in libraries. One key factor identified is compassion fatigue. The phenomenon is the emotional strain that results from prolonged exposure to others' suffering. In our helping profession, all library employees may consistently experience the emotional and psychological burdens of others, which in turn can lead to exhaustion and decreased empathy (p. xvi). Newman identifies that it is imperative to address compassion fatigue with proper training, support systems, and self-care practices to maintain the health and resiliency of library staff.

It stands to reason that compassionate leadership, as a style that requires consistent engagement with compassion and a presence for library staff, can exacerbate this fatigue. This is why compassionate leadership cannot be the only leadership practice you utilize. It is vital that you check in with yourself as a leader to assess whether you are experiencing compassion fatigue and, as a result, are unable to engage in compassionate leadership for your own well-being.

Questions?

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Jean Pillement, *A Shipwreck in a Storm*. 1782. Pastel on gessoed canvas. [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), New York.

The compassionate leadership style is understudied in library settings and non-existent in terms of specific roles beyond directors, such as library instruction coordinators, whose roles are often poorly defined and often include leadership responsibilities and accountability without a supervisory role or organizational power.

We hope today was the start of a conversation within libraries and something we can continue to explore together as we work to provide information literacy instruction in an extremely challenging moment for higher education and libraries of all types and sizes.

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